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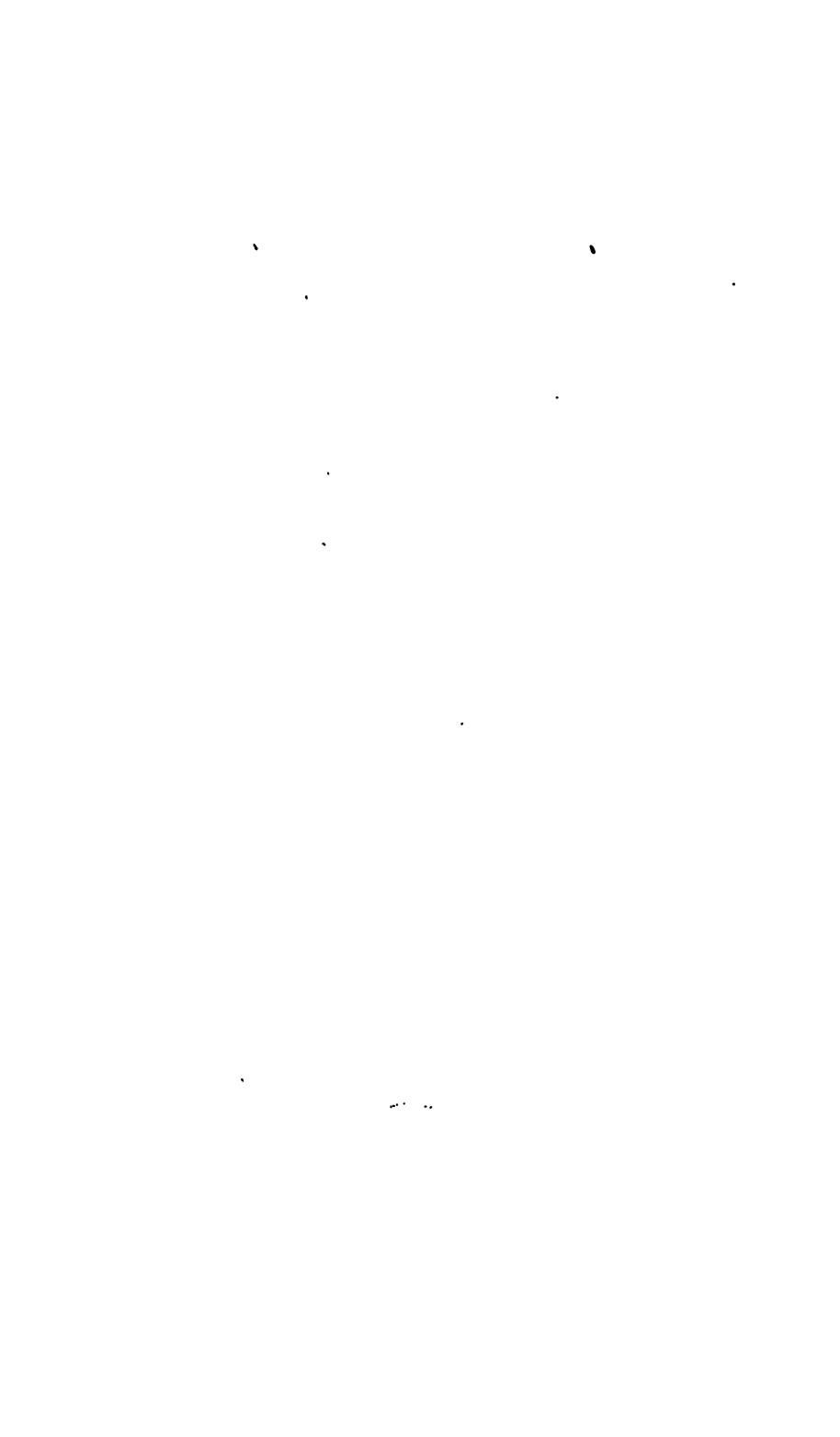
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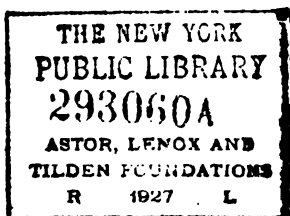
CLARA LOUISE BURNHAM
AUTHOR OF "NO GENTLEMEN," "A SANE LUNATIC," "DEARLY
BOUGHT," ETC.

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CONTENTS.

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. AUNT ANN'S DECISION	5
II. THE LAST PLATFORM	11
III. KATE'S THEORIES	20
IV. KITS' TRAVELS	28
V. AUNT ANN'S SHOPPING	36
VI. KATE AND MARGERY	44
VII. A VISIT OF CEREMONY	55
VIII. THE GIRLS' PHOTOGRAPHS	67
IX. A COUP D'ÉTAT	78
X. MARGERY'S CONFESSION	93
XI. A LITTLE DIFFERENCE	100
XII. AN UMBRELLA AND A ROSE	116
XIII. BAD NEWS	126
XIV. THE COMMITTEE DECIDE	140
XV. FRILLS AND FURBELOWS	149
XVI. MRS. FARRAR'S MUSICALE	156
XVII. CROSS-QUESTIONINGS	178
XVIII. KATE ACCEPTS ADVICE	190
XIX. MARGERY RECEIVES	205

XX.	A BUSINESS OFFER	218
XXI.	AUNT ANN OPENS HER HEART	233
XXII.	RAY CROSSES THE RUBICON	246
XXIII.	UNCLE AND NEPHEW	260
XXIV.	KATE'S DIPLOMACY	278
XXV.	IN THE COUNTRY	286
XXVI.	MARGERY SUSPECTS	298
XXVII.	AT MRS. PARKER'S	313
XXVIII.	MRS. EXTON IS SHOCKED	332
XXIX.	"THEE LOVED I EVER"	345
XXX.	WOOD VIOLETS	356

OF NEW YORK,

NEXT DOOR.

CHAPTER I.

AUNT ANN'S DECISION.

AUNT ANN EATON was alone in her sitting-room. Her surroundings were as orderly as heart could wish. Not a shred or clipping defaced the rag carpet. Not a speck of dust rested on the straight-legged stand which held her work-basket. The brass handles of the secretary, which seemed to be drawing itself flat against the wall, in order to take up as little room as possible, tinily reflected the fire glowing in the open stove; a generous, warm fire, such as one would know to be the only sort Aunt Ann could build. The very cat, an imposingly large, well-fed Maltese, had his fore-paws tucked in symmetrically under his soft breast as he basked in the warmth, and studied the leaping flames with half-closed eyes.

The table in the centre of the room, beside which his mistress was sitting, was covered with a faded green and black cloth which had seen years of service, but was spotless yet. The lamp upon it shone with rubbing, and burned with a clear, broad light.

In all the simple scene there was nothing awry but Aunt Ann's own cap, and this misfortune, of which the wearer was unconscious, was due to the fact that two pairs of spectacles had in turn been pushed to the top of her head, to make room for a third, in heavy gold frames, and much too broad for the dear woman's comfort, through which she was studying one of two open letters which lay spread out before her on the table.

Her forefinger traced an imaginary line under each sentence while she read as follows, muttering her comments aloud : —

Oct. 20, 1881.

DEAR AUNT ANN, — Do you remember the fellow who lived at your house three years ago, and nearly ate you out of house and home? (I declare I didn't, at first; it's a wonder how time tempers afflictions.) I do not believe you have had the courage to keep another summer boarder since we left you. (Yes, I have, young man; but your match I have never found.) And yet I want you to forget old scores, and do me a big favor. I saw by the papers that your father had left you. (H'm, h'm! poor pa.) Please accept my hearty sympathy. I know you expected, even when we were in Cedarville, that he could not live long, so I hope you were prepared for the loss. (That can't ever be, my boy.) What I want you to do, Aunt Ann, if you are well, and willing to make a change, is to come into the city this winter, and keep house for a few of us old bachelors. I have come to Boston to go into my uncle's office, and, according to his suggestion, a few fellows and myself, instead of boarding, are going to take a house, and have a housekeeper; just the right sort of a one, like you. Do not refuse us, will you? I have cracked you up to the skies;

out don't you be afraid; you can do every bit I have promised, and if you get tired of us we will let you off in the spring. And don't you worry about being ruined. My appetite has fallen off wonderfully. You ought to see my present indifference to apples and boiled eggs. (Well, well, I can't hardly believe it, but still I'd hope for the best.) Uncle John has closed the bargain for a house this morning, so please hurry up and let us hear your decision. As for me, I shall not have an easy moment until I know what sort of dinners I am going to have all winter. (*That* don't sound like carelessness of victuals.) So do not postpone, but speak at once the one little word which is to make happy

Yours forever,

RAY INGALLS,
—— Block, City.

Aunt Ann sighed, straightened up in her chair, and, gently removing the glasses, wiped her tired eyes with her handkerchief.

"Pa's specs don't see any more objection to it than mine did," she observed, "and I don't suppose I have any right to sleep on it another night, if they are really in a hurry, as that rascal says they are. I wouldn't go if it was to have the care of that boy; no, not if Cedarville was duller than it is twice over; but there's Uncle John! Yes, indeed, Kits," looking pensively across at the somnolent cat, "Uncle John is my mainstay. It is lonely here, now that pa's gone; lonelier even than I thought it could be. Not that you care, Kits. So long as you have your fire and me, you don't care a mouse-tail whether I am happy or not."

At the reproachful tone, Kits opened his mouth and went through the form of a "meow," too inde-

lent to utter a sound, then relapsed into unrepentant enjoyment.

"Yes," continued Aunt Ann, her eyes wandering thoughtfully to the blaze, "if I was really aunt to that scamp I should shrink from undertaking any position of responsibility near him; but his own uncle will have him under his eye night and day, and I shall leave everything to him. Lucy Robinson and her mother will be glad to come right in here. They'll take good care of the house, and then, most important of all, I can have an eye to the girls"; and Aunt Ann drew toward her the second letter, not quite so well worn as the first, and, adjusting her own familiar spectacles, perused it once more:—

Boston, Oct. 20, 1881.

MY DEAR AUNT ANN,— It is an ill return for your kindness and interest in our welfare, to write you so seldom. I am especially to blame for not responding sooner to your kind offer that we should spend the winter with you. You understand the case, do you not, dear Aunt Ann? We cannot afford to live in any way but the present one. If we came to Cedarville, it would be as dependants upon you, while as we are now situated we do manage to be self-supporting. I ought not to give up the church position that Madam Sevrance procured for me, which, with the little teaching I do, and Margery's good management at home, makes both ends meet, although in an inelegant way which irritates my little sister very much. It is kind of you to keep up your interest in nieces of whom you have seen so little, and I value your affection, and am conscious of a dependence on the fact that there is a loving aunt who would receive us into her quiet, peaceful home in case of

need. I fear you are very lonely since grandfather went, and I wish I had a home where I could welcome you to pleasant change and recreation. Surely no daughter ever was more devoted than you have been. When I think of what your cares must have been in that tedious illness, I realize your patience and cheerfulness.

It is time to give a lesson, and I must go. Write soon again to

Your loving niece,

KATE STANDISH.

"A good girl," mused Aunt Ann, "a good girl. I should like to know the ins and outs of their life since Henry Standish died. Oh, men, men! I suppose I hadn't ought to set up for a judge, being an old maid; but from my standpoint, Kits," addressing the heavily purring cat, "it does seem as though your sex gallivants through life, while ours plods. Married or single, seems as if the torments of life, mostly little ones, to be sure, but a pile of 'em, was ours, and the pleasures yours. However, it looks as though I was going to have a better chance of studying male character than what I have had. I shall like the change to the city; I don't deny it. I've been tied down pretty close, and I shall like to see some of the gay sights. But I shall *amazingly* like to walk in upon Kate and Margery." Aunt Ann stooped her plump figure, remarkably shapely for her fifty years, and adjusted the ribbon on her cat's neck. "Blue does become you, Kits. Now look at there. You've smooched your best tie. Mercy on me, what will you do in Boston, where it's so much dirtier than this? It will be a big bother, but

I shall have to take you around to the stores and see if I can match you in ribbon, and if I can I shall buy a whole bolt, and keep you in gray all the time. It will mortify your pride, and be good for you. Now, then," with a sigh and a shake of the head, "I must write a word to Ray Ingalls. Dear, dear, it's a great step; but it does comfort me to think that I shall only have my routine work to do,—there will be good, staid Uncle John to see to the rest. Boys are a terrible responsibility, especially that boy."

CHAPTER II.

THE LAST PLATFORM.

AT the depot of one of the more distant suburbs of Boston, on a late afternoon in October, stood a group of young ladies conversing in an animated manner, with complete disregard for that law of etiquette which demands that one person shall have finished speaking before another commences. One in particular seemed to be the centre of attraction. She was a pretty creature of eighteen years, with a great deal of red-brown hair which evidently resisted being compressed into twists compact enough for fashion, blue eyes, now glinting and laughing merrily, and a fine skin, smooth and white.

"Oh, I ought to have taken the last train, girls. See how low the sun is. Kate will be so annoyed!" she exclaimed parenthetically; "she won't let me come out here again for an age. How fortunate that this is an express. There it comes now."

Then followed last words, exactions, promises, and kisses, in such profusion as seems possible only among a bevy of schoolgirls, lasting so long as to threaten the possible losing of this train also.

"Write to *me* first, Margery. You've promised, remember."

"See if you can't come out next Saturday. If Kate won't let you, run away."

"Yes, yes, anything. Mercy, the bell is ringing! Do you want me to get left again? The last platform of the last car, as usual," laughed Margery, mounting to that elevation just as the engine moved.

Her enthusiastic friends walked a few steps beside her on the platform. They were her schoolmates, from whom she had been prematurely separated by reverses of fortune. A most unkind fate they felt it to be, that gay, clever, generous-hearted Margery should be obliged to leave them, should be obliged to forego all the glories of graduation for petty money considerations. She was the prime favorite of her class, and had not an enemy among the number. No wonder they hailed with joy the occasional visits she was able to make them, and parted from her with a reluctance that would fain retard the time and train that bore her away. "Good-bye, good-bye," came from the group, who waved their handkerchiefs after the retreating figure. Margery sent them a gay nod and a lingering, smiling look, then turned to enter the car. As she did so, a man jumped up on the opposite step, a belated passenger, who had evidently but narrowly escaped waiting for the next train to Boston. He was a tall man of grave countenance, smooth shaven, thin-lipped, and dark-skinned.

Margery glanced at him, and then turned the handle

of the door. As it stuck, she flung her body against it. Her companion observed her fruitless effort. "Allow me," he said, and the girl stepped back cautiously, holding well to the rail, for the express had now attained full speed, and the rush and swing confused her.

Her fellow-passenger grasped the handle, looking in through the door, which remained firmly closed in spite of his efforts.

"What is this," he muttered; then continued in a louder and annoyed tone, "This car is empty and locked."

"Locked! It cannot be locked!" exclaimed Margery, leaning toward the window and looking aghast at the blankness within, while a sensation of loneliness and fright came over her, despite the familiarity of the flying landscape. What a situation! Alone, or worse than alone, on the last platform of the last car of a train which for nearly an hour would not cease from this jerking, swinging, dizzying pace.

She glanced apprehensively at her companion, and with a woman's quickness comprehended the perfection of his attire. His uncompromising face, too, with its slight frown, reassured her. She plucked up courage to address him.

"Isn't there something we could pull, or — or something?" she suggested, with a vague look at the roof of the car; but her voice was too faint to be heard, and moreover no cord dangled encouragingly above them. At the same moment her companion

grasped her suddenly and uncereemoniously by the arm as the train in going around a curve swayed her irresistibly against him.

"Thank you, — excuse me," she exclaimed. "Oh, I am so dizzy."

Her fellow-passenger's countenance lost its introspective frown as he noted her pallor.

"Do you feel faint?" he inquired anxiously, only now realizing that somebody else, and that somebody quite a young girl, required his attention. "Struggle against it if possible, I beg of you."

Margery gently withdrew her arm. "I shall not faint. I never do. I am only a little dizzy-headed."

"Then you had better sit down on the step. It will be much safer. Wait a moment," and so saying, the gentleman removed the large silk handkerchief lying immaculately white beneath his coat collar, and, spreading it on the step, placed his foot upon its edge to hold it in place.

"Thank you, but don't do that, please; it is not necessary at all," said Margery, looking down over her well-shaped, but inexpensive dress.

"I am sure the step would soil you," he replied. "Give me your hand, please."

The girl obeyed and was soon safely seated.

Her companion looked at her undecidedly. "Is there any danger of your being giddy enough to fall off?"

"No danger at all, thank you. I am very comfortable." She received no reply to this, and for a time

no sound was heard save that of the train. Curiosity then overpowering her, she looked slowly and cautiously over her shoulder. On the opposite step sat her fellow-passenger, his back turned squarely upon her, his head erect, and his whole attitude that of a dignified resignation to circumstances. As her uneasiness disappeared, her ever ready and keen sense of the ludicrous gained control. What would the girls say to see her now, solemnly sitting back to back with this unknown companion. At the thought she began to laugh; and as it was rather a new experience to Margery to be obliged to contain her laughter, her fellow-passenger, when a little later he remembered her existence and turned about, saw her shaking with apparent sobs. He leaned toward her, startling her by his sudden speech.

“Can I do anything for you? Are you feeling—ill?”

She turned her flushed face toward him.

As he saw her irrepressible smile and his own mistake, he also smiled, in a slight, grave fashion. Margery grew warm with a sudden surprise. Like a flash arose before her a scene in one of the busiest streets of Boston. A pair of horses rearing and plunging at a crossing. Herself, her arms full of bundles, attempting to cross before the excited animals, and, starting back in fear, dropping the packages, which scattered hither and thither. A gentleman behind her, who came to the rescue, picked up the parcels, and restored them with that smile accompanying the action.

Margery in her agitation could not have remembered the man, but she remembered the smile. It was loftily kind, and sweet, and noble, she thought. It had not in it a shade of ridicule.

The vision passed. Her companion was speaking.

"I think myself we have cause to congratulate ourselves on the shortness of the days. We might provide the populace too much amusement," he said, and then Margery laughed out contagiously.

"There is something so — so *ignominious* about our position," she returned. "We are so *helpless*."

"Well," replied the other, "if the railroad company thrusts ignominy upon us in this way, it must expect to be cheated. We have solved the question of economical travel at any rate."

"It is really getting dark," said the girl, looking about apprehensively. "I ought to have caught the last train."

"Will your people be anxious about you?"

"My sister will, I am afraid. She is apt to be anxious."

"You must let me take you safely home," was the kind reply. "As we have shared so many difficulties together, I should be sorry not to see you well situated before we separate. There is my card." Margery accepted it.

The name thereon was John Exton.

"Thank you, Mr. Exton," she replied, "but Kate, — my sister — will be sure to meet me. She always does, no matter how erratic my movements are."

"You are fortunate to have a sister so devoted."

"Ah," with a little shake of the head, "indeed I am. Nobody knows what Kate is, — nobody except me, and I sometimes think that I cannot appreciate her."

Mr. Exton regarded the young, earnest face, growing indistinct now in the waning light.

"You are modest," he replied.

Margery looked up, and observed the increasing number of buildings and the lessening speed of the train.

"Ah, we are nearly there," she said; then, with sudden eagerness, "Don't you think we could manage to get off a little before the train stops? I do not wish to — to —"

"To take too many people into our confidence?"

"Yes. Only," here she gave an irrepressible little laugh, "I do wish Kate — my sister — could see us first. She would be so — so magnificently shocked."

"Well, I think we can hardly risk her being on the spot at precisely the right moment," and Mr. Exton, who had risen, offered his hand to his companion.

Margery rose with his assistance, and, smiling brightly, handed him his muffler.

"Thank you very much," she said; "I was fortunate not to be alone in this predicament. You have been very kind."

Her companion's impressive figure towered beside her. At her spontaneous words he lifted his hat and bowed slightly.

The train came gradually to a standstill, but before it had stopped Mr. Exton had jumped off and his fellow-passenger stood ready to descend.

With her foot on the second step she caught sight of a tall, graceful figure scanning the passengers with beautiful, anxious eyes.

"There is Kate, now! *Kate!*" she exclaimed. Her sister heard her and turned quickly. She had Margery's exquisite complexion but that the elder's was more colorless, large, gray-blue eyes, and a dimple in the chin, which softened the too great gravity of her face.

"Did you worry, Kate? I know you did. I am so sorry. Let me introduce to you Mr. Exton, who has befriended me ever since we left W——. This is my sister, Miss Standish."

"Shall I have the pleasure of escorting you home, or of getting you a carriage?" asked Exton, after the customary salutations had been exchanged.

The look of annoyance which had flashed into Kate's face at sight of her sister in the company of a stranger, now deepened, while Margery glanced at her anxiously.

"I thank you, no," Kate said, quietly and civilly. "My sister and I are never afraid together."

"I fear your sister must be chilled. I shall be glad to call upon you to-morrow and assure myself that she has not suffered."

Miss Standish slipped her hand through Margery's arm, while her color rose, and her manner grew even more distant.

“My sister is very strong, Mr. Exton, and we do not receive visitors. Good night.”

But Margery did not relish the abruptness of this parting. Even as her sister drew her away, she turned and held out her hand to her new friend with her brightest look.

“Thank you again, Mr. Exton,” she said, as he shook her hand. “Good night.”

CHAPTER III.

KATE'S THEORIES.

ON their way home the sisters were seated on opposite sides of the horse-car which they had taken just outside the depot. Speech being impossible, mischievous Margery rather enjoyed the stern seriousness of Kate's face. The latter evidently avoided meeting her sister's eye, and therefore Margery sedulously endeavored to catch the wandering glance, and, on the rare occasions of success, beamed upon Kate with a cheerful assurance which rather deepened the impenetrable gravity of the latter's countenance.

At last Kate rose and rang the bell. The car stopped in front of a block of brick houses, into one of which the girls passed with the aid of a latch key. Margery came last up the stairs and followed her sister into a back room on the second floor.

"Shall I go right into the closet, Kate," she asked, "or may I say a few words in my own defence first?"

"I am not in a joking mood, Margery," replied the other, taking off her outer garments.

"That remark is quite superfluous. You dear old

Kate! how you do distrust me, don't you?" and Margery turned her back in an injured fashion as she struggled out of her tight-fitting walking-jacket.

Kate's anxious eyes followed her movements.

"I know that you seldom stop to think until afterward," she answered.

"If it wasn't all so perfectly ridiculous, I should be angry with you," said Margery, half laughing, but with an inclination to tears. "You have only lived three years longer than I have, though you do pretend to be such a grandmother. We have had the same bringing-up, and yet nothing will convince you that I know how to behave. I wish you would either send me to a reform school at once or else have a little confidence in me," and now the tears triumphed, although the laughter struggled with them.

Kate put an arm around the speaker and drew her down on the side of the bed. "Don't get excited, Margery dear. You see I am not excited."

"Oh, of course not, Grandma!" retorted the other, tearfully.

"I have every confidence in your meaning well, Margery; every confidence. You know that. But you do not always look at things as I do. You do not take the same view of our circumstances that I do, nor shape your actions to suit them as I wish you would."

"No, I believe you would like us to dress like nuns, and go about with our eyes down and our hands folded. I don't see the necessity for it. I never

shall. We have lost our parents and our money, and our home; but we are young and full of life, and it is folly to talk about our behaving like eighty-year-old dummies."

"Margery, we are unprotected girls, alone in a boarding-house. We cannot —"

"Who wants to be protected?" interrupted the other, with extreme scorn. "In this free country, girls can protect themselves."

"That is precisely it," said Kate, seriously. "We must protect ourselves by being entirely quiet and unobtrusive. Now, you are naturally an obtrusive girl, Margery."

"Thank you so much!" exclaimed the other, in indignant surprise.

"A noticeable girl, I mean. You need always to be toning yourself down and controlling your impulses."

"Well, this is a pretty reward for my behavior to-day, I must say," burst forth Margery, her fluffy hair awry and her eyes flashing. "I should like to have seen *you* in my place. I should like to know what *you* would have done. I know one thing, you would not have been as agreeable as I was."

"I am sure I should not," returned Kate, with something like a groan, and a return of her anxious expression. "You know I am waiting for an explanation of how you and Mr. Exton should so suddenly have become friends."

"You speak as though you knew him."

"I have known him for some time by sight, as he

attends the Church of The Apostles. He is very rich and an important personage in the society."

"Does he bring a wife to church with him?"

"No."

"Then I shall insist upon going with you hereafter."

"You will not do anything of the kind," said Kate, quickly. "We decided that, you know. You will continue to attend our own church."

"Well," said Margery, with a comical little shrug, "we diverge, as the novels say." Then, suddenly changing her manner, "Kate Standish, you shall not look at me that way. You are absolutely scowling. All this fuss because you saw a good, rich old church-member help me off the train. It is absurd."

"He is not old. He is not over thirty," replied the other, severely. "His riches we have nothing to do with."

"No, I wish we had," said Margery, mutinously.

"And we have no idea whether he is good or not."

"Did you ever see him smile?"

"Certainly not."

"Well, I have, and I know he is good. He is the very man who helped me with my packages that time a few weeks ago when I was so nearly run over."

"And he scraped acquaintance with you on that slight pretext!"

"Yes, indeed," exclaimed Margery, with desperate gayety, "and we laughed and chatted all the way in from W —, and we have promised to correspond,

and I am going to the theatre with him next week, and —”

“Margery!”

“He looks like that kind of man, doesn’t he?” continued the girl, dropping into a severe tone. “That is what I find fault with you for, Kate. You are too suspicious. Of course I should have told you the whole state of the case when I first came in, if you hadn’t looked so portentously, aggravatingly solemn and suspicious. You ought to believe me innocent until I am proved guilty, instead of *vice versa*. You ought to have an unshakable confidence in me,” pursued Margery, with dignity. “For instance, if I tell you that I stayed out on the back platform of the train with Mr. Exton all the way in” — here Kate evidently became rigidly apprehensive — “you ought to be entirely undisturbed.”

“You didn’t, Margery!”

“Yes, I did. If I tell you that he lent me his muffler, and held me by the arm, you ought to look — well, exactly opposite in every respect to what you do now. Shall I throw some water in your face? If I tell you that we kept out of sight and didn’t pay a cent of fare — yes, really, that we stole a ride —”

“Margery, there is some explanation!”

“Oh, you really think so? That is what you ought to have thought in the first place. You are quite right.” And Margery condescendingly gave an account of her adventure, ending with a hearty burst of laughter.

"It was the funniest thing in life. I didn't entirely realize it at the time; and now you see how wise you were to snub Mr. Exton, and refuse to allow him to call."

"Does any gentleman call on us?"

"No, and none ever wanted to before," returned the other, bluntly; "I mean since we have been here."

"Where would you receive him if he were to come? I cannot picture Mr. Exton in Mrs. Brown's parlor," said Kate, with a little scornful smile.

"He is the loveliest man I ever saw," said Margery, irrelevantly and thoughtfully; "not handsome, but a thousand times better than that. I am so glad he befriended me."

"Why?"

"Because he will be more likely to remember me," was the *naïve* reply.

"He will not remember you," said Kate, coldly. "It is not probable that you will ever see him again."

"It will not be my fault if I do not. I shall be on the lookout for him."

"You will be very foolish if you think about him at all. You are practically as distantly separated from him as though you were a ragpicker."

"Oh, now you are talking Madam Sevrance."

"And Madam Sevrance is right."

"Ah me, how tiresome you make the world between you," said Margery, wearily. "My father and mother were as respectable as Mr. Exton's."

Kate drew nearer, put her strong young arms around

her, and laid her cheek tenderly on the red-brown hair. "It is not that, dear," she said; "but Mr. Exton is of the aristocracy of this free and equal land. Professional women have neither time nor ability to mingle in it."

"Yes, yes, and you are a professional woman; and professional women are often courteously received in the best society, but always with a proviso. Their intellects or accomplishments are admired; but they are never fully and freely received, nor married by the swells of swelldom. I have heard it all often enough," and Margery turned impatiently in her sister's arms. "Dearest Kate," with a sudden affectionate qualm, "you have had to turn professional for me."

"Professional is rather a big word for it, dear," and the older girl smiled down with a world of love upon the face on her breast. "Besides, is it not for myself first of all?"

"And I am mean enough to fume over my part of the work. Oh, Kate, I do hate it all; economizing, and scrimping, and living in this miserable dark hole!" And Margery looked contemptuously around the little room, with its unsightly outlook on alleys and sheds.

"I *love* it," said Kate, fervently; "for it is ours, and we are independent."

"But we are so young, and want so much; and we never have any diversion; and we have no friends of any account. You avoid anybody at all promising, like Mr. Exton."

"For our own good and happiness, Margery. The

time may come when all that sort of intercourse will be possible. Now it is impossible. You see it?"

"Dear old Kate! I wish it were as easy for me to be reconciled to it as it is for you. Why, we might as well be dead as to live this way," and Margery sat up with an emphatic gesture. "There is only one thing that can deliver us, and that is for one of us to marry an *immensely* rich man; and I think Mr. Exton would do. He is pretty old, and does not wear a mustache; but he would do."

"It is very condescending of you to think so," remarked Kate.

"In fact half the difficulty is surmounted now."

"What do you mean?"

"That I am in love with him," returned Margery, calmly.

CHAPTER IV.

KITS' TRAVELS.

It was on a clear, bracing morning that Aunt Ann left Cedarville. It was not only a momentous move for her, but it affected all her neighbors to such an extent that the depot platform was well filled with mourners of all ages. Aunt Ann cheered the older ones to the best of her ability with hearty words, and silently bestowed peppermints upon the children. She even had a bright reply for the village croaker, a dismal widow, who gave it as her opinion that the traveler would "surely rue the day."

"I ain't one to look back," said Aunt Ann, firmly. "I expect a sight of trouble wherever I am, and I propose to take it in a new place; that's all. Perhaps I'll be pleasantly surprised, and have an easier time than I look for; though I should hate to disappoint you, Sister Low," she added, with a cheerful laugh, to which the dismal one responded with a groan.

"We shall miss you beyond tellin'," the latter observed, with increased dolor. "There won't be nobody to hope for the best, now you're gone."

"Begin yourself, sister; begin yourself. You never can tell what you can do till you try." It was a parting bit of advice; for the engine appeared around the curve, good-byes were exchanged, and the beloved traveller was launched upon her journey. She waved her hand, in its roomy glove, at the window, as the train moved, and then leaned back in her seat with a sigh of relief. She had nothing to regret in this break in the monotony of her life. Her house was in order, and left in safe hands. Her trunk she had herself seen lifted upon the train. Her own personal appearance she knew to be the height of respectability. She was arrayed in a black dress, cloak, bonnet, and gloves, with a pale mink collar, having tabs down the front, from which depended six tails. Her muff was of the same; and on her arm hung a spacious covered black basket. This she now took carefully in her lap, and eyed with a new expression of anxiety. As the basket, however, presented nothing suspicious in its appearance, but continued to repose lifelessly upon the mink-tails, she relaxed her gaze, and began to look with interest upon her surroundings. She found plenty to excite her wonder and admiration. Her interest in mirrors and plush had not yet subsided when the conductor made his appearance. Although Aunt Ann usually felt the most placid indifference to the male sex, the sight of this good-looking functionary strangely perturbed her. Her heart leaped in her bosom, and unconsciously she braced herself.

She gave him her ticket with a hand whose trem-

bling she only hoped he would not observe; and at the same unhappy moment the cover of the basket upheaved in a manner as mysterious as it was unmistakable.

"Ahem," said the conductor, fixing sharp eyes upon it. "A pretty big lunch-basket you have there."

"Yes," replied Aunt Ann, folding her hands convulsively upon it; "I have a good, healthy appetite, thank you, sir."

"Madam, I am obliged to ask you what you have in that basket."

Aunt Ann met his gaze with one which was stonily firm, although desperate.

"Fur," she replied.

"Fur?" and the conductor smiled broadly, upon which Aunt Ann took encouragement.

"Yes, young man," she said, with a pleading look that would have melted an ogre, "very valuable fur, that I wouldn't be separated from for any money."

"Well, mind it stays in the basket, or else I shall have to call around again," and the conductor passed on, pursued by Aunt Ann's benedictions.

"How could you, Kits," she exclaimed, reproachfully, with her lips close to the wicker. "I've most got a chill, I was so scared; after all the lessons you've had, too, and the hours I've spent carting you around in this basket. Oh, how shall we ever get through the day!"

Still, on the whole, Kits redeemed his character. Once or twice he uttered an audible protest against the

unprecedented length of his imprisonment; and at such times Aunt Ann would clear her throat with astounding suddenness and loudness, or hum a few measures of "Silver Street."

It was a great relief to her when finally Boston was reached. Before the train stopped, a very good-looking and exquisitely attired young man boarded it, and made a tour of the cars, evidently in search of some one. It was quite as much of an astonishment to Aunt Ann as to her fellow-passengers to see such a "glass of fashion and mould of form" pause in the aisle beside her. She looked up, and met a pair of brown eyes that fairly laughed as they met hers, and a strangely familiar smile, only altered by a youthful, daintily pointed mustache. The apparition raised his hat.

"Aunt Ann, aren't you ashamed of yourself? You don't know me."

Aunt Ann drew her head back with a jerk; and the corners of her lips twitched down.

"Why, you rascal!" she exclaimed, holding out her hand, "I do believe it's you."

"I believe so," replied the new-comer, laughing and shaking her hand.

"How you have grown!" pursued Aunt Ann, in delighted admiration, surveying the well-proportioned figure.

"Well, don't tell people that aren't interested," returned Ray, flushing at the distinct compliment, and aware of their neighbors' attention. "Let me take your basket."

Aunt Ann compressed her lips, and gave him a prodigious wink, but refused his offer.

“Why? Contraband goods?”

“Hush-sh!”

Fortunately the train now came to a final stop; and Aunt Ann, hugging the basket, followed her escort out upon the platform. A hackman, who had evidently been told to await them, touched his hat, and went out to his carriage.

By the way, nowhere does Boston's boasted culture show itself more refreshingly than in the behavior of her hackmen, who stand unique among their kind; a quiet, restful contrast to their brethren, the howling, shrieking mob that infests the depots of other cities, and distracts the weary traveller. From the depths of a grateful heart I say, Blessings upon Boston hackmen!

Aunt Ann sank into the cushioned seat of the carriage as into the lap of luxury.

“Ray, this is extravagance,” she said, with a sigh; “but I am beat.”

“We want to treat you well, so you'll stay with us,” replied the young man, who possibly might have been conscious of a desire to conceal his unmistakably country friend from public gaze. Certainly no squeamishness of that sort appeared in his manner, which was hearty and affectionate, while a light of amusement danced in his eyes whenever they fell upon his companion.

“Come, now, Aunt Ann, at least put your basket over on the other seat. No wonder you are tired.”

"No wonder, indeed," replied the other, emphatically. "I would rather do a day's washing than sit in state on velvet, as I have to-day, with such a load on—"

"Your lap?"

"No, sir, my mind. Ray Ingalls, look me in the eye. *Kits* is in this basket."

"Old Kits! Good enough," laughed Ray.

"I don't think, Ray,"—and Aunt Ann's head fell on the side, and she took a cajoling tone,—"I don't think you ever really *hurt* Kits."

"Hurt him! Of course not. Why, Kits just dotes on me. Let's have him out. Come on, old fellow."

"No, no. Hands off," exclaimed Aunt Ann, holding down the lid firmly. "Wait till we get—there."

"Home; say home, Aunt Ann. It will be a home when you are settled in it. I confess it isn't much like it now."

"Tell me all about it. How many are there of you?"

"Four. There's Herring, a dry old fellow that I didn't want around, but Uncle John did, so he had to come. Then there's Sharp, figure of a telegraph pole but first-rate fellow; and Wiley, a widower, some relation to Kits I think, by the way he steps around; and your humble servant. You might set your cap for Wiley, Aunt Ann; gray and respectable, you know. He's in the office."

"And your Uncle John," added Aunt Ann, in her earnestness passing over Ray's suggestion.

"Oh, no, Uncle John doesn't live with us. He resides with his parents in the city — or rather with one parent, he hasn't any father."

"So Uncle John isn't going to live with you," said Aunt Ann in dismay, half reaching out for her basket, as though minded to fly without further parley from the responsible position in which she saw herself placed.

"Why, what is the matter? You look blank. You hadn't set your heart on Uncle John, had you?"

"You are with him all day, you say?" questioned Aunt Ann sternly.

"Of course, off and on," returned Ray, mystified. "What in the world is the matter?"

"The matter is that I won't have the responsibility of you, Ray Ingalls. I'll feed you, and that's all I'll do."

Ray burst into a laugh so hearty that the basket lid upheaved dangerously in Kits' desire to know what was going on. Aunt Ann repressed it with many a soothing word.

"It's a bargain," said the young man gayly. "Now, don't forget. You are to ignore everything about me but my appetite. I see you remember me as fondly as I could have wished. We are nearly there," he added, in a more serious tone. "I'm really afraid you will be a little bit homesick at first, but you mustn't give way to it. You will get used to no front yard, and all that, after a little. You see we had to take a house in a block, and in a very unpretending street, to make it

agree with the finances of all concerned; but the horse-cars run by the door, and it is convenient to business, and there are bedrooms enough, which was the great thing."

"How long have you been in?"

"Only three days, but that has been long enough, taking our meals at restaurants. I tell you, Aunt Ann, if you want to see four men of assorted sizes and ages on their knees to you this evening, you have only to make a cup of your coffee for them. Here we are," as the carriage drew up to the curbstone. "Let me take Kits; I'll treat him like glassware."

CHAPTER V.

AUNT ANN'S SHOPPING.

No wonder Aunt Ann slept but poorly the first night in her new surroundings, although neither homesickness nor dissatisfaction had any part in her restlessness. Ray's prophecy as to the effect on her family of the new housekeeper's coffee proved scarcely an exaggeration.

Mr. Herring's sour visage unpuckered under the aromatic influence as, at Aunt Ann's suggestion, the gentlemen sat about their dining-table the last thing before going to bed. Mr. Wiley's placid countenance became still blander in expression as he sipped, and Sharp, a young man very tall and rather slender, exclaimed as he finished his cup and Aunt Ann left the room, "That is a woman that I could love."

Ray meanwhile drank his coffee with an air which said plainer than any words, "I told you so."

"Baby, you're a brick," cried Mr. Sharp, wringing Ray's hand with cumulative delight. "You deserve well of your country, and you shall have a new rattle to-morrow."

"Yes," added Mr. Wiley with a pleased smile, "our youngest has not deceived us. I feel convinced that he has kept his word nobly."

But in spite of the many kind words showered upon her, and the benevolent glow of satisfaction that warmed her kind breast at the prospect of making her fellow-beings comfortable, Aunt Ann did not sleep well that first night. She missed her own familiar bed, the horse-cars thundered and jingled upon her unsophisticated ear. The night seemed to her scarcely begun before morning was heralded by the myriad noises of the city streets; and when, very early, a faint scratch was heard on her door, she answered the call with alacrity.

"Come right in, Kits, and mew as loud as ever you've a mind to," she said. "I should like to hear a familiar sound. I suppose you haven't slept a wink either. Why, what ails you, poor thing? has the journey and trying to sleep in Babel upset your poor wits? I shouldn't wonder." For Kits was running to his mistress and then back to the door, repeating the movement again and again in great excitement. Aunt Ann put on her spectacles finally, and followed her pet to the threshold, where she suddenly jumped back, uttering a wild shriek, and then paused, appalled at her own indiscretion.

Ray, whose room happened to be next, thrust his head out into the hall. "Aunt Ann, Aunt Ann, what is it?"

"Oh, Ray, do excuse me. I hope all the gentlemen

will excuse me; but Kits has caught the most *tremendous* rat, and he's brought it right to my door."

"Good for Kits. Let it stay there, Aunt Ann. I'll see to it later," and the speaker drew his head in, and silence reigned again within the house.

Aunt Ann shook her finger at her favorite as she noiselessly closed the door. "Kits Eaton," she said, softly but sternly, "the next time you bring one of them dirty critters to me I'll see to you with a switch."

Kits winked his golden eyes slowly, licked his chops, and waved his tail in long sweeps, looking like the graceful little tiger that he was. He mewed restlessly at the door, unwilling to be separated so soon from his prey, and Aunt Ann looked at the open-faced silver watch which had been her father's.

"Well, the days are short. It is high time I was down stairs," she observed, with satisfaction. "I wonder if Rosalie is up yet." Rosalie was the laundress, waitress, and chambermaid, whom Aunt Ann had advised Ray to engage before her arrival. She would do all the cooking herself.

The procession that was made down stairs by Aunt Ann, Kits, and the rat, would have convulsed Ray if he had been a witness to it. Most willingly would Aunt Ann have embraced Ray's offer to attend later to Kits' trophy, but Kits himself proudly picked up his prey, over which Aunt Ann had stepped gingerly, and followed her. She turned at the head of the staircase, and beheld him with disgust and dismay, even tapping him on the head, in the hope of making him

drop his burden ; but as she feared disturbing her family by making a sound, and as Kits paid no attention to pantomime, she was fain to proceed down backward, the cat dropping lightly from stair to stair, following her slow movements, and she quite as anxious now that he should not let go his hold as she had wished him before to do so. With sundry encouraging pats and murmurs the descent was finally accomplished, and Aunt Ann noiselessly opened the front door, out of which the cat sprang daintily, depositing the rat on the upper step. Aunt Ann threatened and coaxed in vain ; Kits would do no more.

"Very well," she said at last, her cheeks red from the conflict, "you disgrace us the very first morning we are here ; I have no more to say to you, sir."

But Aunt Ann's family did not agree with her. When they came down to breakfast, one and all remarked admiringly upon Kits' prowess, and professed delight at the fact of having such a valuable animal in the house. Perhaps the perfection of Aunt Ann's rolls, the delicate brown of the potatoes, and the absence of scorched spots on the beefsteak, added lustre to the attractions of the housekeeper's favorite. However, whether the comments were sincere or no, they pleased Kits' mistress, who was a comfortable figure at the head of the table, in her clean calico dress, and the black satin bow which, between the hours of half-past six and twelve, always concealed Aunt Ann's bald spot, a very small bald spot, from a prying world. Kits slumbered as peacefully beside the air-tight stove

as he ever had done before the open fire at home; all the faces about the table beamed contentedly in unaccustomed comfort, and Rosalie, a hard-featured maiden of uncertain age, waited deftly, if severely. Rosalie disapproved of everything on principle, but Rosalie was not blind to her own interests; and in one or two light skirmishes in the kitchen, this morning, she had discovered that it would not be best for her to disapprove too strongly of cats. The discovery had not sweetened her disposition, but nobody took any notice of her. Aunt Ann was cheerfulness itself, and pressed the good things of life upon the gentlemen with the most natural hospitality. It was easy to see that they were charmed with her, and, after the others had gone to business, Ray lingered behind to tell her so.

"They're all broken up," he declared, ingenuously. "Now, which shall it be, Herring or Wiley? I don't think Herring is the elder, although he has that dried-up, brittle appearance; but I forgot, it is Uncle John that you want to see. I'll get him to come around."

"Yes," said Aunt Ann, placidly, "I should be happy to see him; but we won't trouble to send for him until you make me anxious, Ray. If you should do anything to make me anxious, I should want to see him right off."

"What do you expect I am going to do?" said the boy, laughing, and lifting the points of his tiny mustache. "Oh, by the way, what about those nieces you mentioned in your letter?"

Aunt Ann shook her head, and smiled. "I don't

know what about them yet. I mean to find out to-day."

"Are they pretty?"

"I don't know," replied Aunt Ann. "I haven't seen them since they were very young. They are good as gold, dear children."

"You'll have them here, won't you, Aunt Ann? We would all try to make it pleasant, you know. I am not much acquainted in the city myself."

"A very good idea," replied the other, nodding, with a kind, thoughtful expression in her eyes. "I don't believe they have much pleasure. It would sort of chirk 'em up, wouldn't it?"

"Of course it would. How old are they?"

"Eighteen and twenty-one."

"Oh, I'll help you chirk them up, with the greatest pleasure in life."

"You always were a kind-hearted boy, Ray"; and, with the grateful tone ringing in his ears, Ray set off for the office, whistling an air from "Fatinitza"; while Aunt Ann transferred her attention to the blue ribbon about Kits' neck.

"You got those smuts out in the back yard this morning," she mused. "There isn't any use in hesitating. It would be sinful luxury to keep you in blue this winter. I'll put on my things right off, and go out and buy some gray ribbon, and afterward I can go and see the girls."

So Aunt Ann, after attending to sundry housekeeping cares, changed her dress, and, getting a few grim

directions from Rosalie as to the way to reach the shopping-ground, bade good-bye to Kits, and set forth.

She was delighted with the convenience of taking the car at her door, and being conveyed to her destination.

"I shall be getting lazy presently," she mused, with a pleased smile, giving the conductor a signal to stop as soon as her eyes fell upon a thronged business street. She entered a large, attractive store, and was ushered to the ribbon counter. Here she soon became absorbed in consideration of the various shades of gray. There was a puzzling variety. She re-adjusted her spectacles repeatedly, and frowned perplexedly. There was some one next her examining a box of remnants. Aunt Ann glanced up over her glasses, and seeing a pretty girl, plainly dressed, appealed to her.

"Won't you be good enough to help me decide something?" she said; and the girl looked around and saw an elderly person, with a bolt of gray ribbon in each hand, gazing at her earnestly through steel-bowed spectacles.

"Certainly; what is it?" she asked, brightly.

"I ought to have brought a lock of his fur," observed Aunt Ann, explanatorily, "and yet I don't know where he could have spared it. It's malty color. Which of these do you think would match best?"

"Malty color?" repeated the girl, faintly.

"Yes, it's for a malty cat. He's very hard on neck ribbons, and I thought coming to the city, where it's

dirty at best, that a gray necktie would be the most durable, and yet Kits could feel as genteel as ever."

"I should think it a very good idea," said the girl, smiling, while her color stole up and her eyes twinkled, "and it seems to me that shade," designating the one in Aunt Ann's right hand, "would be best."

"Just what I thought, but I wasn't sure," replied the other, with deep satisfaction. She paid for the bolt of ribbon and then turned again to her neighbor. "I want to ask one more question," she said, taking a slip of paper from her purse. "Will you tell me what car I take to go to No. 506 Berkshire Street?"

"Is it a boarding-house?" asked the girl, looking slightly surprised.

"Yes, just so, just so, it's a boarding-house," replied Aunt Ann, nodding eagerly.

"I am going there myself. I shall be happy to show you the way."

"Well, now, that's great luck for me," said Aunt Ann, beaming, "and you're very obliging, I'm sure."

So saying, she followed her guide out of the store, casting many a lingering look to the right and left at the beautiful and tempting fabrics displayed upon the counters.

"Shouldn't wonder if I came down every day to stare," she thought, anticipating with still greater elation all that was open to her to see and to do in the wonderful city during the winter.

CHAPTER VI.

KATE AND MARGERY.

THE horse-car made too much noise to admit of conversation with a stranger, but Aunt Ann was more than content to gaze out the window, full of interest in every novel sight. Her pretty companion finally stopped the car before a row of brick houses, and led the way out. Aunt Ann followed her slowly up a flight of steps, and the young girl paused at the door.

"Whom do you wish to see?" she asked politely.

"I will carry word."

"Thank you, my dear; I want to see Miss Standish."

"Shall I give her your name?"

"Yes, please. Say Miss Eaton from Cedarville."

The young girl started and looked in wide-eyed amazement. "Why, Aunt Ann, is it you?" she cried.

"Mercy on us, you ain't Kate!" exclaimed the other, in incredulous delight.

"No, but I'm Margery," replied the girl, a little disturbed at finding herself related to the mink-tails, which she had eyed mischievously all the way up in

the car. But she submitted gracefully to the loving embrace with which Aunt Ann immediately saluted her.

"Come right up stairs," she added heartily, leading the way, "Kate will be delighted."

And before the sudden tears had dried on Aunt Ann's cheek, more followed as she held her sister's first-born in her arms.

"Emma's children," she repeated lovingly, again and again, as she held the two girls out at arm's length and scrutinized them.

"Kate, you look like her, my love, you look like her. My poor dear little Emma!"

"Why did you not let us expect you?" said Kate, when all three were at last seated quietly. "We received the letter telling of your proposed move, but you did not say when you should arrive."

"I didn't think to," replied Aunt Ann, simply. "Of course I meant to come and see you the very first thing. I only got into Boston last night."

"Does your plan for the winter promise well?"

"It does seem to. They acted real comfortable this morning when they went to work," and Aunt Ann laughed silently.

"And does it not seem odd," asked Margery, with interest, "to be the only lady at the table with a lot of strange men?"

"There's only four of them."

"What are they like?" pursued Margery.

"There's a bachelor, and a widower, and a young

man, and a boy. The boy is Ray Ingalls, who was at our house with his mother one whole summer. She's died since. He is the one that got me to come. No, I don't see as there's anything odd about it. They are going to pay me to make them comfortable, and I'm going to get a chance to see the city and have a change, and get acquainted with my nieces," and Aunt Ann smiled lovingly on the girls, looking from one to the other with much repressed admiration. She thought of Ray's inquiry regarding their looks.

"Wait till he sees them," was her triumphant mental comment.

"Now tell me all about it, Kate," she said, with sudden seriousness. "I don't know hardly anything. I never saw your mother but once after her marriage. It was a constant heartbreak to her, longing for her own folks. I always knew it, though her letters were guarded. Your father was a proud man and a hard man. You mustn't mind my saying so."

"He was not so to us," replied Kate, gravely, "but I fear my mother was unhappy. I was too young to be her confidante. Our father's prosperity seemed to die with her. He gradually lost his money in unsuccessful ventures, and died a poor man. After he had gone I kept Margery at school one year longer, but dared do no more as we had so little. You know the rest. We found this room; my singing teacher, a woman of great influence in certain circles, insisted upon continuing my lessons, and put me in the way of earning a little income, which keeps us comfortable."

"I do not do anything, Aunt Ann, and Kate won't let me," said Margery, bluntly.

"Margery does just as much as I do. She takes care of everything here, makes our clothes and keeps them in order, and is such a bright companion that I think I could not live without her."

Aunt Ann looked from Kate's calm, beautiful face, to Margery's, flushed and childish.

"I suppose you have a great many friends," she said, "and some of the pleasures that young folks have."

Margery started impulsively to speak, but Kate laid a hand on hers with a quieting gesture, and replied :

"No. Of course we have our friends at W —, where we were at school, but we made no Boston friends while there. By the time I graduated, father had left New York and come here, where we have always lived obscurely. Margery and I have been so alone I have thought it very unadvisable to make friendships with such people as we should enjoy, because of the impossibility of giving as much as we should receive. I hope you agree with me, Aunt Ann, and will help me to keep Margery contented."

"Nonsense!" said the latter, mutinously. "Aunt Ann is going to take pity on me, and introduce her young man and boy to me, and have me to dinner ever so often."

As Aunt Ann saw the color and anxiety creep simultaneously into the elder girl's face, she felt a guilty twinge, thinking of her conversation of the morning

with Ray, and how very nearly Margery's random words traced the programme she had indeed intended.

"My dear," she said, addressing Kate with mild uneasiness, "don't you think there is danger of your getting a little morbid thinking these things over? Seems to me you may cut off Margery and yourself from a great deal of innocent pleasure."

"That is what I tell her," chimed in Margery, eagerly, even caressing the mink-tails in her pleasure at having finally found an ally. "It is Madam Sevrance that has confirmed all these ideas in Kate. She is a tall, gray-haired woman who thinks she is the most worldly-wise creature in existence. She adores Kate and tolerates me, and is determined to protect us both. I wish she would let us alone."

Kate brought her calm smile to bear on this outburst. "Especially when she takes us to the opera?" she suggested.

"No, I am glad we get two or three operas out of her during the season; but I am sure she owes us something."

"We owe her everything," said Kate, slowly and distinctly.

"I do not ask to seek friends, Aunt Ann," continued Margery, turning to her new-found relative, "but when people meet us, and wish to make our acquaintance, and are delightful in every way," here she fixed Kate with reproachful eyes, "I think Kate does very wrong to snub them and freeze them and deprive me of their society."

"Perhaps your sister makes mistakes," said Aunt Ann, hesitating a little before her elder niece, "but at any rate they are on the safe side. The next question of that sort that comes up you'd better agree to let your old aunt from the country have a word to say about it."

"I will agree to that," said Margery, quickly.

Kate smiled; a little inscrutable smile that made her very beautiful, but which exasperated her junior beyond bounds.

"But Kate won't," she added hotly, after the little pause. "She will continue on her calmly superior course and keep both our noses down to the grindstone just as usual. You are our natural protector, Aunt Ann, and I shall take your advice."

"Well, well," said Aunt Ann, pacifically, "you are a pair of good, brave girls, and everything will come out right for you in the end. You are singing in church, you said, Kate."

"Yes, I was very fortunate to get that position."

"She sings like an angel. Why shouldn't she get any position she wants?" put in Margery, with her usual abruptness.

"You don't say so," said Aunt Ann, with interest. "I hope it's a Congregationalist Church."

"No, Episcopal."

"You don't say so!" exclaimed Aunt Ann, this time sepulchrally.

"But Margery goes to our own church, of course. You will like to go with her."

"And I will go with you sometimes to Kate's church," said Margery, in a wheedling tone. "You will want to hear her sing, and I want to see—the congregation."

"My dear, that would be but a worldly Sabbath," said Aunt Ann, reprovingly, "but I must certainly hear Kate sing. Her mother was the best in the choir when we were girls. You," looking about the room, "you'd ought to have an organ here; but," with a sudden brightening, "I noticed my folks have got a piano in the parlor, and we can have all the music we want."

"How nice!" cried Margery, but Kate shook her head.

"You had better do the visiting, Aunt Ann. We can do pretty well here, for Margery is an expert on the banjo."

"The banjo!" repeated Aunt Ann, in horrified amazement. "What under the living canopy made you take up that nigger-minstrel thing?"

"Oh, it is quite fashionable," laughed Margery. "Kate bought it for me on my birthday. It has employed ever so many of my spare hours, and just wait till you hear Kate sing a gay little song to it."

"Mercy on us!" exclaimed Aunt Ann, with a start. "I could sit here all day and listen to you girls, and feast my eyes looking at you, but what'll become of Rosalie and the house and the dinner. Rosalie's going to buy it, but I've got to cook it."

"I don't like to have you leave us, dear Aunt Ann," said Kate, affectionately. "I shall go with you a little way."

"I should be glad if you would, for I'm greener than any punkin yet, though I shall learn my way soon. Good-bye, Margery," and Aunt Ann kissed her younger niece with a loving embrace. "I shall want to see you both every day, I'm sure. I'm going to try to fix it so Kate will consent to your doing half the visiting any way. Good-bye, dear," and she followed Kate down the stairs.

When they were on the sidewalk, Kate slipped her arm through that of her aunt.

"I am so glad you did not happen to mention upstairs where you were living," she said, as they stood waiting for a car.

Aunt Ann started. "Well," she exclaimed, "it would be a pretty state of things if I couldn't mention it now. Kate, my dear child," beginning an excited fumbling in her pocket, "it just comes over me that I haven't the least idea what street I do live on. Stupid critter that I am, leaving the house as I did this morning without looking around me. I've no patience with myself. But that," pointing to an approaching horse-car, "is the same colored and looking car as runs by our house. I've got the number and street written down, and if it's in my purse I'm all right," and she drew forth her purse and searched it nervously. "It ain't there," she announced at last, in a desperate tone.

"Never mind," said Kate, soothingly, "if you are sure these are the right cars we can get in and ride until you recognize the house."

"But I never should," with a despairing gesture; "it's in one of these blocks that looks all alike. There *was* a rat on the upper step this morning, but Mr. Sharp took it off. Oh, I ain't fit to be let go loose. I need a keeper," and Aunt Ann turned around wildly. In the midst of her anxiety a large cat sitting in a neighboring window attracted her attention. "There's a handsome cat!" she exclaimed, "most as handsome as Kits," she continued, admiringly. "Why," in blank astonishment, "I do believe—Kate Standish, it *is* Kits. Hold me, Kate, I believe I'm dizzy. That's my own cat and my own house, and I live next door to you!" and Aunt Ann sat down on the steps without ceremony and laughed immoderately.

As the truth dawned upon Kate, she joined in the laugh, but some thought turned her grave.

"Do you think it would be possible to keep it from Margery?" she asked. "If she knows this she will be running in and out at all hours."

"Bless her heart, why shouldn't she?" returned Aunt Ann, wiping her eyes. "Well, could we have asked anything better than this?" she added, rising from her lowly position. Kate looked the reverse of grateful. Her brows knit themselves in the effort to decide instantly on the right course.

"Walk up and down a little, Aunt Ann, you are not in so much haste, now," she said, offering her arm.

"Why, won't you come in?" returned the other, hospitably.

"Not just now, thank you," replied the girl, leading her aunt along the sidewalk. "I want to talk about Margery. She will be delighted to have a place so near where she can run in informally. You see how she chafes at the life we lead, and how she craves some excitement. I do not like the idea of her meeting these strange men, of whom we know nothing."

"Why, Kate, what do you mean, child? I know a great deal more of Ray Ingalls than I do of you, and his mother was a perfect lady, a little fussy and pernickety, but a refined woman. As for the rest, they were every one picked out by Uncle John himself!" and Aunt Ann looked around at her companion, triumphantly.

"Uncle John! What Uncle John?"

"Ray's. He's in his uncle's office, you know. What an old head yours is, Kate, to be on such young shoulders. Why, child, it's pitiful to see you so strict and caretaking at your age. You ought to be lighter-hearted."

"I am light-hearted, believe me," returned Kate, smiling, "excepting when Margery is unhappy."

"Well, let the child get what pleasure she can with me, and don't worry your pretty head."

"Oh, wait a little, wait a little. Promise me to keep your home a secret, if possible, for a week. By that time you will have made the acquaintance of your family; and promise me one thing more,—that you

will not introduce any of them to Margery until I give you permission."

"Well, well," and Aunt Ann bridled a little, "I flattered myself I was going to take care of you young people when I got here. As far as that goes, it seems as though I might as well have stayed at home."

Kate stood still, and took one of the speaker's hands as she faced her. "You would not say that, nor be vexed, if you knew what a gratification it is to me that you have come. I feel more respectable and less isolated. I have had a great deal of care, and it is natural to me now to look ahead and be cautious. You must not misunderstand me about Margery. She is only very impulsive, and very anxious for a good time, and I wish to shield her from any social position in which she would not have been placed had parents and fortune remained to us."

Aunt Ann looked into the earnest face, which lit up with a sudden, brilliant smile.

"So you will promise me?"

"Yes, dear, if you think it necessary," responded Aunt Ann, meekly; and then they separated, going up their respective steps, and entering the houses; one going to Margery, and the other to Kits.

CHAPTER VII.

A VISIT OF CEREMONY.

It was the afternoon of the same day. Aunt Ann had eaten her solitary luncheon, had made a delectable dessert for dinner, and now was lying down in her own room. In the fatigue attendant upon her father's long illness, she had contracted this habit of a daytime nap; and to-day particularly she stood in need of the rest, in consequence of her sleepless night and the journey of yesterday. But in vain she counted an endless procession of sheep jumping over a stone wall, slumber refused to visit her eyelids. There was too much food for thought in her morning's adventures. Her beautiful nieces! It pleased her loving heart that only a partition divided her from them.

"Smart, brave, good girls," she mused; and then she thought with satisfaction of a certain balance to Miss Ann Eaton's credit in the Cedarville bank. "If anything happens to either of them, or they come to a tight place, why, there's that money, and nobody but me to use it. But when Kate Standish accepts any of it, she *will* be in a tight place," and Aunt Ann reflected

with some degree of awe upon the fairer and graver of her young relatives.

While she was still lying on her bed and pondering, she heard the front door bell ring, and Rosalie's measured tread as she moved through the hall to answer the summons.

"If there was a knock at my front door at home," she thought, "I should be certain that somebody wanted to see me; but it's kind of restful to know that whoever that is, he or she don't know that I'm alive."

What, then, was her astonishment to hear Rosalie mounting the stairs, and presently to see her, tall and unbending, in the doorway.

"There's a young lady below to see you. She wouldn't send any name. Says she is an old friend."

"A young lady, an old friend," murmured Aunt Ann, rising precipitately, and going to her mirror to smooth her ruffled hair, and don a head-dress of black lace, which in the afternoon always replaced the black satin bow.

She descended the stairs in great curiosity, entered the parlor, and came face to face with — Margery, laughing and sparkling with mischief.

"Miss Eaton, I believe," exclaimed the visitor, coming forward affectedly, and offering her hand with a great deal of manner. "You are so near a neighbor, I thought we ought to become acquainted at once."

"Where's Kate?" gasped Aunt Ann, looking over her shoulder apprehensively.

"Gone to give a lesson," replied Margery, gayly. "When the cat's away, the mice will go visiting."

"Does she know that — that you know that —"

"No, she does not know anything. If she had, she would probably have gagged me and tied me before she left," laughed Margery. "Do not look so frightened; it is not your fault."

"How did you find out, child? Kate thought she hadn't best let out yet a while that I was living so near."

"Oh, yes, I know. That dear Kate would like to keep me shut up like a princess in an enchanted castle. She thinks the only safe amusement for me still is to sit in one spot day in and day out, saying 'goo,' and shaking a rattle. When you left me this morning, I wanted to see you go, so I went into the front room. It belongs to an old gentleman, who is away all day. I do several little things for him, — mend his gloves, and all that, — and feel a right to go in and out of his room when I like; so I went to the window, and watched you and Kate. I saw you gesturing and looking troubled, and finally you sat down on the next door steps. Then I *was* astonished; for I thought you were crying. Of course, I watched more closely than ever. You and Kate walked and talked a little more, and then you came in here. Imagine my amazement; but I understood it all in a moment. I rushed back into our room, and thought I would wait and see if Kate would confide in me. I suspected she would not. Well, she came in looking as calm and collected as

ever. Said I, 'Did Aunt Ann get started all right?' 'Oh, yes,' said that perfidious girl. 'Queer,' I went on, 'that she shouldn't tell us where she lived.' Kate raised her eyebrows indifferently. 'I told her, you know,' she replied, 'that we could not come to see her very well.' 'An affectionate niece you are,' said I; and I could not help smiling, for I made up my mind that moment to come and see you just as soon as Kate went out, and I thought how completely I was outwitting her, when she supposed she was winding me around her finger."

"I am afraid she will be real put out," returned Aunt Ann, unable to shake off the potent influence of that severe young martinet, Kate.

"Oh, well, if you did not wish me to come—" and Margery made a feint of rising.

All Aunt Ann's old-fashioned hospitality and love of kindred took fire. "My dear child, my dear Margery, want you to come! You know, you *know* I do, only your sister is so determined."

Margery laughed. "Never mind my sister for a few minutes. When she finds out about it she will probably mount the rostrum; but I shall not be intimidated, for I know there is no reason why I should not be here now. I want to see the cat."

If this abrupt request was artful, it was also eminently successful. It put to flight every other thought of Aunt Ann's mind. She started up briskly.

"Of course, and so you shall. He's got on one of his new ribbons and it matches, — well, you shall see."

Here she went to the hall. "Kits, Kits, Kits," she cried, and with a loud mew Kits left his beloved stove and came bounding up the basement stairs. "Come in and show yourself, sir," said Aunt Ann, proudly; and indeed Kits was a handsome specimen as he stepped into the parlor, where Margery praised and caressed him, and marvelled at the fortunate shade of his collar.

"How do you like the house?" asked Margery, looking around the parlor with its ingrain carpet, marble centre-table, and half-dozen chairs.

"I suppose it is well enough for a city house; the stairs are going to worry me some. I'm pleased to be here, but I guess in the spring, when a body wants a little yard room and some clean green grass, I shall be singing 'There's no place like home.' The furnace is a real good one, and you see the men rented the furniture of this room, the dining-room, and the kitchen, and one bedroom, the one I have. Their own bedrooms they furnished themselves. Yes, those pictures," seeing Margery examining some good ones that decorated the walls, "belong to them, too, and that piano is Mr. Wiley's. I guess he's a performer. Can't you play me something?"

Margery seated herself and rattled off a concert polka with flexible fingers, but she sighed as she made mistakes, and finally brought the piece to a premature close.

"You see I cannot play any more. I have no opportunity to practise."

"My, how those little hands can fly about," said Aunt Ann, admiringly. "It's a pity you must lose what you worked so hard to get."

Margery shrugged her shoulders. "Yes, it is one of a thousand pities; but I should be ungrateful to complain now that I am having such a charming adventure. How many nice little sociable times we can have together! You will be alone so many hours of every day, just as I am."

"Bless your heart, indeed we can," said Aunt Ann, much pleased. "I only wish I had anything here to amuse you."

"I do not need to be amused. I wish I could make you a scarf for that cold, bare table."

"I suppose you know how to do all these new-fangled embroideries."

"Yes, I know a good deal about it, and enjoy the work; but materials are expensive."

"Would you do the work if I supplied the materials?"

"Yes, indeed."

"It's a bargain, then, and I'll be as fine as a fiddle when I get back to Cedarville. Mr. Wiley has the back parlor for his room. He's got it fixed up fine, you see." Aunt Ann paused in the act of throwing open the double doors. "Kate!" she murmured faintly, with a bewildered remembrance of her promises of the morning, not quite certain as to what they included.

"Never mind Kate," said Margery, impatiently.

"Seeing a pretty room isn't going to hurt me. Which is Mr. Wiley?"

"He is the widower," and Aunt Ann threw open the doors. The room thus disclosed looked quite luxurious compared with the unhomelike parlor. It had a soft carpet, a long mirror, a handsome dressing-case on the bureau, and heavy hangings at the windows. There were materials for a fire laid ready in the grate, and beside it was the easiest of easy-chairs.

"He is an odious, selfish man," said Margery, quickly, "or he would have two easy-chairs."

"My dear, not at all. He is a very pleasant man; and this," leading the way to a small apartment on the same floor, "is Mr. Herring's room."

"Which is he?"

"The bachelor. You see he isn't so much fixed up."

"No, I should say not," replied Margery. "It is a regular hermitage."

"I don't know as you care to take the trouble to come up stairs."

"Yes, indeed I do," said the girl, determinedly. "I wish to see everything," and as Kits just then rubbed against her, she stooped and patted him.

"You're finding out what a nice girl she is, are you, Kits?" observed Aunt Ann, and the three ascended the stairs in great harmony.

"This little front room is Mr. Sharp's," announced the hostess.

"Which is he?" came Margery's stereotyped inquiry.

"He's the young man; and a clever kind of a fellow, I think, so fond of Kits," replied Aunt Ann, complacently.

Margery stood at the door and gazed about the room. Evidently Mr. Sharp was a wheel-man. Several photographs of bicyclers, single and in groups, adorned the walls.

"That little room at the other end of the hall is Rosalie's, and this next is Ray's. You see it is the mate to yours."

"He is the boy," said Margery.

"Yes, he is the boy," replied Aunt Ann, with a heavy sigh, as she opened the door and revealed the interior of the room. It was handsomely furnished in a light, sunshiny fashion, with dozens of knick-knacks about, made by feminine hands. A dainty smoking-jacket hung over the back of a chair, and a rack full of photographs on a table attracted Margery's attention.

"I wouldn't mind looking at them if I were you, Margery," said Aunt Ann, in sudden trepidation. "I've been turning over in my mind to-day whether I ought not to mention those pictures to Uncle John. I suppose they're actors or something like that, and there's his mother's likeness right on the same table with them."

But Margery scarcely heard these words. Certainly she did not heed them. She had recognized one of the photographed faces. Her countenance brightened as she took it from its place.

"This is Mr. Exton!" she exclaimed, gazing into the steady eyes. "How strange to find his picture here."

Aunt Ann adjusted her spectacles and looked curiously over Margery's shoulder.

"Who is it? One of your friends? He's a handsome man, but he looks awful set."

"I am slightly acquainted with him. He goes to Kate's church. In fact, he is one of the committee on music that decided her fate and gave her the position."

"He looks young to have the say of anything to do with the church."

"He is not young. He must be over thirty," said Margery innocently.

Aunt Ann laughed. "That's young enough to be my son."

"Well, the real reason is that he is rich and influential. He is perfectly lovely, Aunt Ann. Oh, I wish I could have this picture."

"Well, if Ray is anything like what he was three years ago, you might have anything of his for the asking."

"It would be such fun to mystify Kate with it," said Margery, laying down the photograph with a sigh. "You didn't know I was a lovelorn maid, did you?"

"Bless my heart!" and Aunt Ann turned her spectacles upon the speaker, in dismay.

"Really, and that is the man," indicating the picture dramatically.

"In love with him? *You*, Margery?"

"Yes, indeed. In love with his smile and his money. Do you think I will ever get them?"

Aunt Ann passed her arm around the girl as she turned away, in doubt whether to regard her confidence seriously. "You will if he has good taste," she said kindly; "but I wouldn't trust men, Margery."

"I do not have the opportunity," returned the girl, naively. "Kate has a private and particular glare for any man who happens to turn his head my way. I must go home now and begin some sewing, in order to appear a pattern of domestic loveliness when she gets back. Oh, won't I have my revenge on her! I will play with her as Kits would with a mouse."

"My dear, I *think* you had better tell her," said Aunt Ann persuasively. "I don't approve of deception."

"Then what do you think of her wanting to keep me in the dark about your being here?"

"Why—" hesitated Aunt Ann, clearing her throat, "I think her motives were of the best kind."

Margery laughed. "So are mine; irreproachable. Now show me something else."

"There is nothing left but my room," and Aunt Ann ushered her guest into the front chamber. "You see they provided for me very kindly."

"Ye-es," assented Margery, looking about critically.

"The night I arrived, Ray had a vase of roses on the bureau."

"Why, your Ray is a clever little fellow," replied the girl approvingly.

"Yes, he's kind-hearted, very kind-hearted."

"Your room looks too bare. We must fix it up a little. I can give you a photograph of myself as a sort of nucleus for a collection if you like."

"I should like one, of all things."

"Kate and I both had them taken last summer, for the schoolgirls, and we have two left. I will run in and get them now."

"Well, if it would not be too much trouble," said Aunt Ann, her countenance beaming.

Margery ran lightly down stairs, and out. When she returned Aunt Ann was at the street door to meet her. Despite the brevity of her niece's absence, she had had time to throw off the cheer of her influence, and to think again of Kate. Her manner and smile were constrained as she thanked Margery. "Won't you come in again?" she asked.

The girl detected the uneasiness in her tone, and laughed merrily.

"Kate succeeded in awing you pretty completely, didn't she? No, thank you, I will not come in again now. Do not worry at all, Aunt Ann. You know it is only your family that Kate is shy of, and they are away all day, are they not?"

"They certainly are," replied Aunt Ann, in tones of self-justification. "I can't see, Margery, why you shouldn't go to the village — I mean down town — with me to-morrow morning, to get that fancy-work

material, and then come home to lunch here, and, of course, have Kate come in too. How could she object?"

"Kate is not at home to lunch to-morrow. She teaches in the Highlands, and lunches there too; but I will come."

"Very well," and Aunt Ann nodded smilingly. "Talk it over with Kate. I think she will let you."

Margery kissed her hand without replying, and departed. Aunt Ann closed the door, and examined the pictures she held, uttering many an incoherent expression of admiration.

"If you can find me a handsomer pair of girls than that, I'd like to know it," she murmured, entering the parlor, and placing the photographs on the bare mantel-piece.

"I wish Emma could see them," she added, fondly.

The cat rubbed against her. "Kits, it's time the potatoes were on. You're always willing to get by the kitchen fire. Come, let's go down."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE GIRLS' PHOTOGRAPHS.

As a matter of course, Aunt Ann's first dinner was a success. It really was a marvel in how cool, and unruffled, and neat a condition she could come straight from the work of preparing it, and seat herself at the head of the table. No wonder those four erstwhile homeless men cast appreciative glances at her and at each other as they consumed the excellent meal.

"I trust your first day in Boston has passed pleasantly, Miss Eaton," observed Mr. Wiley, in his smooth, quiet tones.

"It has been a wonderful day," she replied, briskly.

"We want to hear all about it, Aunt Ann," said Ray, who was in a high state of satisfaction.

"Does Miss Eaton add the ability of the *raconteuse* to her manifold accomplishments?" asked Mr. Sharp.

Ray chuckled. "Here, Aunt Ann, Ted wants the biggest orange in the dish for that."

"Don't be impudent, Baby," retorted Mr. Sharp. "Do favor us, Miss Eaton."

"What'll you have, sir?" inquired Aunt Ann, putting out a helping hand, vaguely.

"He only wants to hear an account of your day," explained Ray. "Did you see your nieces? Miss Eaton has some nieces in the city."

"Yes, I saw them," replied Aunt Ann, with dignity, making up her mind to be exceedingly reserved on what she had discovered to be so delicate a subject.

"When are they going to visit you?" pursued Ray. "We are all hospitably inclined, aren't we? We should all be delighted if Miss Eaton would feel at liberty to entertain her relatives here at any time. Eighteen and twenty-one," he added, *sotto voce*, to Mr. Sharp, who sat next him.

The latter assented effusively. Mr. Wiley bowed and smiled blandly, and said, "Most certainly." Mr. Herring grunted what might be taken for an assent.

"Invite them to dinner, Aunt Ann. The younger one can sit between you and me, and the elder between you and Mr. Wiley."

"Get out!" ejaculated Mr. Sharp, with more haste than courtesy. "Where do I come in?"

"Oh, you can look at them, Teddy, my boy," replied Ray, patronizingly. "When shall it be, Aunt Ann?"

"Never, I am afraid," said Aunt Ann, firmly. "They don't seem to have much idea of visiting."

"Oh, that won't do," burst forth Ray. "We rely upon you to persuade them, and you must not disappoint us."

"It disappoints me, you may be certain," returned Aunt Ann, feeling pleasantly important. "All the more because I find them — well, all I could wish them

to be. I got their pictures," she continued, tempted beyond her strength to tantalize her family by allowing them to see what they missed. "Rosalie, you may go up on the parlor mantel-piece, and bring me the photographs that are there."

Rosalie obeyed as one who says, "I go, but of mine own accord!"

"There they are," continued Aunt Ann, complacently, taking the pictures from her handmaiden, and giving Margery's to Ray, on her left, and Kate's to Mr. Wiley, on her right.

Could Kate, calmly eating her evening meal on the other side of the partition, but see into the neighboring dining-room, the change in her expression would probably be a study.

"Whew!" exclaimed Ray and Mr. Sharp, simultaneously, the latter leaning eagerly over the former's shoulder. "Oh, you know, Aunt Ann, no fellow's going to stand this," exclaimed the younger, knitting his handsome brows and smiling involuntarily at the face that looked back at him, saucy and bright, a speaking likeness of Margery's vivacious self. "This—this isn't right, you know."

Aunt Ann bridled, and smiled, and bit her lips, listening to Mr. Wiley's murmured compliments.

The pictures passed about, Ray parting reluctantly with his, and receiving Kate's curiously.

"Why, I know this face," he exclaimed in surprise. "Who is it? I know her perfectly well."

"That is Miss Kate Standish, my oldest niece," said

Aunt Ann, proudly. "I am sure you don't know her, for she don't know you,—and don't want to," she added under her breath.

"Standish. That's it," said Ray, with satisfaction. "It is Miss Standish, the soprano of our church; and she is your niece, Aunt Ann? Well, that is strange. Tell her it is her duty to come. I was never so regular at church in my life as I have been here. She can infer what she pleases."

"I'm very glad you are regular at church, Ray," said Aunt Ann, seriously, "although I'm sorry you see it your duty to attend the Episcopal church."

"But Miss Standish doesn't sing anywhere else."

"Ray!" Aunt Ann's voice was awful now.

"Well, it is my own church, you know," he replied, pacifically.

"That's better," said Aunt Ann. "I must tell you all how lucky I was this morning. Mr. Herring, won't you let me put you on a little more potato?" Mr. Herring refused, and she continued, "I went to the store to get some ribbon for Kits."

"A wonderful animal," interpolated Mr. Sharp, fervently.

"Oh, Ted, this is fulsome," ejaculated Ray.

"Yes, he is, Mr. Sharp. I don't say it because he's my cat. And there at the counter I saw a young lady and asked her advice about the shade; then I told her the number and street where my nieces lived, and asked how to get there, and she said that was just where she was going, so we went along to-

gether, and 'twasn't until we got there that I found out it was *Margery*."

"Who is Margery?" came from all but Mr. Herring.

"The one Ray's got," said Aunt Ann, gesturing toward the photograph of which Ray had regained possession. "You'd think that was enough," she continued, with growing vivacity, seeing the interest in the faces of her listeners. "It makes me out so stupid I'd ought to be ashamed to tell it, but it's too good to keep. When I left their house, Kate came out with me. I all of a sudden remembered that I didn't know where on earth I lived. Well, there I stood, just dumb, when, turning around, who should I see in the window of the very next house," and Aunt Ann laughed at the remembrance until her eyes were squeezed tight shut, "but Kits himself! There I was, *home*."

"Then those charmers live next door," cried Ray.

"Who said they did?" demanded Aunt Ann with sudden and tremendous gravity.

"You did, hurrah!" cried the young fellow, rising from the table and waving the photograph high above his head.

"Ray, Ray Ingalls," in extremest trepidation. "What — where —"

"I'm going right in there to pay my respects. I'll say you sent me."

"Ray Ingalls, if you stir one step I'll send for your Uncle John. Oh, why can't I *never* learn to be anything but a fool. Ray, and gentlemen, —" added

Aunt Ann, rising, and changing her tone from lamentation to impressiveness, "I am very sorry for what I have just let out. My relation with you is a business one, friendly, too, I hope, but I have no right to drag my nieces into it. I see now it was very wrong in me to parade their pictures around so, and 'twas nothing but pride and foolishness made me do it. My only excuse is that Ray, here, seems like one of my own, and it was him started it."

Aunt Ann's listeners rose like one man, even the antiquated Herring being moved by her moist eyes and her earnestness to a chivalrous impulse.

Ray took her hand with affectionate respect.

"Aunt Ann, I beg your pardon. I am sure I speak for all when I say that you have not, and never shall have, the least cause for regret at having shown us these lovely faces; and the fact of knowing that they are so near will only serve to make us behave ourselves the better." Here the speaker turned toward the door. "And there, to stamp your scapegrace and his words with respectability, is Uncle John himself."

They all turned toward the open door where Mr. Exton stood, very tall and very dignified, an expression of curious interest in his eyes. Aunt Ann tried, in a bewildered way, to remember where she had seen his face; but the surprise of discovering the staid and respectable Uncle John in this handsome young man overpowered all other ideas.

"Welcome to our humble board, Uncle John," said Ray. "Miss Eaton, this is my uncle, Mr. Exton."

Mr. Exton came forward, and Aunt Ann shook hands with him. She remembered now that it was his picture Margery had found in Ray's room. Her hospitality, equal to any occasion, asserted itself.

"Of course, you'll sit right down and take your dinner with us, Mr. Exton. You see the table isn't cleared, and there isn't a bit of hurry."

The others, who all seemed sincerely pleased with the guest's arrival, joining their petition to hers, Mr. Exton, after some demur, consented. Aunt Ann could not help remarking that a new interest appeared in the manner of her family, and that each one was eager to add in some way to the new-comer's comfort.

"I did not expect to do this," said the latter, seating himself. "I thought I would look in upon you before I went home, and see how everything was going. Ray has been good enough to furnish me with a latch-key, which enabled me to surprise you."

As Aunt Ann listened to his speech, and observed his manner, she began to feel that there might be a possibility of transferring her trust and allegiance from the bald-headed and stout uncle to this one so surprisingly youthful. As she was thinking this, John Exton looked up with his deliberate gravity, and smiled as he met her attentive gaze.

"I am very glad you could consent to come to Boston, Miss Eaton."

Aunt Ann recalled Margery's words, "I am in love with his smile and his money."

"Excuse me," she said, bustling about among the dishes nervously, "what did you say?"

"You are going to make these forlorn ones very comfortable." As Mr. Exton spoke, he trifled absently with the photographs which lay near him. "Ah!" he exclaimed, concentrating his attention upon that of Kate, "that is a surprisingly good picture of Miss Standish."

For a moment no one spoke; then Ray cleared his throat.

"Yea. It transpires that Miss Standish is Miss Eaton's niece."

"Indeed!" looking up at Aunt Ann with a new interest. "Your niece is very talented."

Aunt Ann bowed her thanks. "I haven't heard her sing yet myself," she replied.

Mr. Exton took up the other photograph. His face broke into an amused smile, which he instantly repressed. "This is her sister," he said.

"Do you know her?" asked Ray, with great interest.

"I met her once," replied Mr. Exton, and changed the subject.

The guest remained for some hours into the evening. After dinner all repaired to the parlor, whose comfortless aspect struck one and all alike.

"Can't the Prairie Flower be induced to build us a grate fire?" asked Ray.

"We can have a fire just as well as not," replied Aunt Ann, "only I didn't know as you meant to use the parlor much."

"We did or we didn't, just as we happened to feel," said Mr. Herring, gruffly. "This is Liberty Hall. That was the understanding."

"Then we will have a fire," said Aunt Ann.

Ray ran up to his room to exchange his coat for his smoking-jacket. When he came down, fifteen minutes later, looking very dandified and handsome in the velvet, satin-faced coat, he was smiling, and tucking something into an inside pocket. Mr. Wiley had thrown open the doors into his room; fires were crackling in both grates. There was a lamp burning on the centre-table, and beside it sat Aunt Ann, reading the evening paper with which Mr. Sharp had provided her. That gentleman was listening to a conversation between Mr. Wiley and Mr. Exton; and Mr. Herring, with his hands behind him, was wandering up and down the room.

Ray rested a hand on Aunt Ann's chair-back, and she looked up at his brilliant brown eyes and the even row of white teeth which he was displaying

"Which of them was here to-day?" he asked softly.

"If you think you will get any more out of me, you scamp, you are mistaken," and Aunt Ann's lips shut firmly together as she feigned to resume her reading.

"Did she like the plan of the house?"

Aunt Ann started, but read harder than ever.

"And did she think Uncle John's picture did him justice?"

The victim looked up this time, really distressed. "It was my fault, Ray, not the least bit Margery's. I showed her over the house."

"I'm glad it was Margery," he observed, with a sigh of relief. "I am complimented that there was anything in my room worthy of her attention." Here he drew forth from his pocket a little brown glove, worn and carefully mended, and let Aunt Ann glance at it before returning it to its hiding-place.

"It was on the floor by my table," he explained.

"Well, I will return it to her," said Aunt Ann, holding out her hand, with some asperity of manner.

"Yes; you will when you get it," he replied, calmly.

"Is this keeping the promise you made at the dinner-table?" asked Aunt Ann, reproachfully.

"Certainly; this is only proving the extent of my respectful admiration. Oh, I will keep my word, Aunt Ann, and you can't blame me for thinking she's awfully pretty."

"No," said Aunt Ann, reflectively, "I can't; but that has nothing to do with her glove."

"The glove has had something to do with her; therefore, so long as you cruelly refuse to let me see her, I shall not be foolish enough to give up the little I have."

Aunt Ann looked around to where Mr. Exton stood, gravely listening to Mr. Wiley's low-spoken remarks on some business topic. His eyes rested absently on his nephew while he nodded assent to his companion's views.

"There's your uncle right there," she threatened. "I can speak to him if I like."

"Certainly; go right up to him and say, 'Can't

Ray give back Margery's glove?" suggested the other, mockingly.

"He doesn't look as though he would have any sympathy with such foolishness," said Aunt Ann.

"Well, why don't you ask him if he would give up a souvenir of a pretty girl if he once had possession of it?"

"Look here, Ray," and Aunt Ann lifted her head suddenly and fixed him with her spectacles, "I won't have any calf-love!"

"No," replied the young fellow, with a mischievous smile; "it is a little late for you to be afflicted that way."

Aunt Ann's lips twitched, but she repressed the smile, gave a heavy sigh, and returned to her newspaper. Ray persistently held his position by her chair.

"Couldn't you sort of praise me up to her, Aunt Ann?" he asked, after a pause. "Rouse her curiosity, as it were?"

"If you care for anybody's good opinion, you had better beg me *not* to talk to them about you," was the short reply; "and now let me alone. I want to get calmed down before bedtime. I've made a botch of my first day in Boston, and I think if I can get a good sleep to-night I may do better to-morrow."

CHAPTER IX.

A COUP D'ÉTAT.

WHEN Margery called the next morning to accompany Aunt Ann on her shopping expedition, the photographs of herself and Kate were standing, one on each side of their aunt's looking-glass, in her room.

"And I'm very glad that pictures tell no tales," thought Aunt Ann, as she put on her outside garments, Margery meanwhile sitting by.

"We had a guest to dinner last night," remarked Aunt Ann, with an important, smiling nod.

"Some one I know?"

"Yes."

"Not Mr. Exton?"

"Yes, Mr. Exton; and, Margery, if you will believe it, he is Ray Ingalls' uncle. I think I never was more taken back."

"Mr. Exton here!" exclaimed Margery. "I think if I had known it I should have been peering in at the windows. Ray Ingalls is a fortunate boy to have such a relative." Then, with a change of manner, "Oh, Aunt Ann, did you see anything of an old brown

glove after I left here yesterday? I dropped it either here or on the way home."

Aunt Ann was stooping down, adjusting her overshoes.

"I didn't find it," she replied, in a smothered voice. "I'm sorry you lost it."

"So am I," replied Margery, holding out her hands, encased in handsome black kids; "for now I shall have to wear my best ones all the time. Our gloves and shoes Kate always buys of the best, and they cost a good deal; but I will not have another pair until she does, no matter how long it is."

Aunt Ann listened with interest. "You shall just have your glove back, then," she replied, indignantly.

"Then you know where it is," said Margery, surprised.

"Yes — no —" stammered Aunt Ann, "Go 'way, Kits, you're always around when you ain't wanted," for the cat had jumped up on the bed beside her, and was pushing his head under her arm.

Kits laid his ears back, closed his eyes, and winced under the unceremonious slap she gave him. "I — I — it may be around the floor somewhere, now. I'll look. You know we were all over the house yesterday."

"If anybody found it he must have thought it was yours," said Margery, hopefully.

Aunt Ann spread out her own number seven hand and laughed uneasily.

Margery looked at her inquiringly. She per-

ceived that here was something which Aunt Ann hesitated to explain, and her curiosity was aroused.

"I'll hunt a little for it," said Aunt Ann, "if you'll sit right where you are. Don't you disturb yourself."

Margery, made more curious by her fidgety manner, obediently sat still, twirling the curtain tassel; but her hearing was sharpened, and she distinctly heard Ray's door open, then all was still.

In a short time Aunt Ann returned, quite flushed in the face, and holding up the little glove in triumph.

"There it is, my dear. I always was a master hand for finding anything that was lost."

"Thank you. Where was it?"

"In the back room, there," replied Aunt Ann, indifferently.

"Oh!" said Margery, and became thoughtful for a minute. Her aunt went into the closet for her bonnet. When she re-appeared, Margery spoke again.

"How old is Ray Ingalls?"

"Ray? He's—let me see—Ray will be twenty-two if he lives till next summer, and he ain't so perfect that I'm afraid of his dying young."

"I thought he was younger," was Margery's comment. She looked at the brown glove askance. The limp and homely little article had acquired significance. She burned with curiosity to know its truant history; but she would not ask. Tucking it into her pocket, she arose.

"Come, Aunt Ann, you must be ready."

"Yes, I am at last. Just wait until I let Kits into the dining-room. He likes to lay in the sun there."

A couple of hours later the two were returning, having successfully accomplished their errands. They had their packages with them, for Aunt Ann was impatient to have Margery begin the table-scarf she had promised.

"And now you are coming to dinner—I mean to lunch, with me?" asked the former, as they left the horse-car. "I hope Kate agreed to it."

"I did not ask her."

"Why not?"

"Because I wanted to come," replied Margery, with a laugh.

"But you told her about yesterday?"

"No, indeed."

"But, Margery! This underhanded way of doing things isn't the way I like."

"How odd! My conscience does not sting, nor whisper, nor do any of the things a bad conscience does," observed the girl, running up her aunt's steps. "Do not refuse me a little change of bread and butter. I do not believe you ever lived in a boarding-house for a whole year or you would not be so heartless."

"My dear child!" protested Aunt Ann, opening the door. "Well," she continued, musingly, "I only made Kate two promises, and I have not broken either of them, only you must surely tell her to-night."

"Very likely I will," replied Margery, carelessly.

"These are her busiest days in the whole week, and we have not talked much. To-night she will come home very tired; but to-morrow morning we shall spend together, and then I will break it to her gently that I have positively called once upon, and lunched once with, our mother's dear sister," and the speaker gave Aunt Ann a hug, which the other returned with interest.

"Let us go into the parlor and see how this satine is for width, first," suggested Margery, and she unfolded the largest package, and spread the fabric over the table; then flinging the embroidery silks upon it, the two fell back with heads on the side and surveyed the combination of color.

"It's going to be perfection, Margery," announced Aunt Ann, admiringly. As she spoke, the front door opened and closed; but she was so absorbed as not to notice it. Only Margery looked up and saw some one standing in the parlor doorway. It was a very stylish and good-looking young man, who held his hat in his hand, and met her surprised glance with interest. His short black hair waved a little above his forehead. His complexion was clear; his whole appearance hearty and attractive, notwithstanding an evident extreme attention to the latest fashion, a weakness common to youth, and one which a girl like Margery is prone to pardon if not endorse. It was a long moment during which they gazed into one another's eyes, then the stranger came in and Aunt Ann looked up. At first she stood mute with surprise, then :

"Ray Ingalls!" she exclaimed, curtly. "What are

you doing here this time of day? When is a body safe from you any way!"

Ray looked at Margery, who could not help smiling, and his pride was touched.

"You are very hearty in your welcome at any rate," he remarked, advancing and picking up the handkerchief Margery dropped.

"Here, Ray, here," said Aunt Ann desperately, moving little by little toward the door, and beckoning to him. "Come out of the room. I want to tell you something."

"Thank you," said Margery demurely, accepting the handkerchief. How glad she was that she had on those beautiful black gloves!

Aunt Ann stood still and bit her lip in annoyance. She saw Kate's compelling face and brilliant smile, as she stood before her exacting the promise which it seemed her destiny to break.

"Margery, you must excuse my seeming inhospitality, dear child, but won't you please go home."

Ray flushed as suddenly and violently as Margery; but while the former darted lightning glances at Aunt Ann, the latter demurely started to obey.

Aunt Ann caught both her hands and pressed them. "I promised Kate I would not introduce any of them," she murmured apologetically.

Ray caught the words, and his wrath became dashed with amusement. Moreover, Margery here sent him a glance from under her pretty lashes, which was, at least, encouraging.

"Miss Standish and I do not need any introduction," he said, boldly, with his best bow. "I recognized her at once; and of course she must have heard of the black sheep of the new household."

Margery smiled. She did not wish to go, and she hesitated to see if Aunt Ann would show signs of yielding. But no.

"Go, Margery; go, dear," she urged.

"Wait," cried Ray; "there is no necessity for such strenuous measures. I only came home to get something I had forgotten. I am going right upstairs," and, with a bow of leavetaking, he strode from the room.

"There, that is good," said Aunt Ann, in a tone of relief, hastening to unbutton her niece's jacket, and to show by her bustling attentions the sincerity of her pleasure at this turn of events.

"I have no patience with Kate," said Margery, pouting, "for making things so awkward for people."

"No, dear, never mind," said Aunt Ann, coaxingly.

"It's only Ray, you know, and it might have been one of the older gentlemen, Mr. Herring or Mr. Wiley."

This consideration did not seem to convey much consolation to Margery, who continued to look much vexed as she followed her aunt down stairs.

They had not been long seated at lunch when they heard a light step running down the upper flight.

"There's Ray going," observed Aunt Ann, complacently. "We're well rid of him at any rate. Come

here, poor Kits; did I give him a bad, wicked nudge this morning? Well, it's a shame, and I'll give you — ”

What dainty Aunt Ann intended to name never transpired; for at that point she heard a sound that filled her with dismay. It was the same springy step, only now descending the basement stairs. She looked wildly from Margery to the door and back again.

Ray entered *sans* overcoat and hat, looking very serious. Margery in *propria persona* he found even more charming than her picture; and he was too accustomed to carry his point, easily to give up such a golden opportunity as the present. He had not spent a summer with Aunt Ann without discerning her vulnerable points, and he entered the dining-room now with his scheme well laid.

The hostess rose and pushed her chair back from the table.

“Don't rise, Aunt Ann,” he said, putting out his hand, calmly; “the fact is, I am not feeling quite right to-day.”

“Not well, Ray?” exclaimed Aunt Ann, anxiously, etiquette and Kate and Margery forgotten.

“It is not much. Do not be alarmed. But you remember the slight affection of my left lung?”

“Yes indeed. The very thing that made your mother bring you to the farm.”

“Exactly,” assented Ray, gravely. “I had a curious sensation in my left side this morning,” here a quick glance at Margery, whose sulks had suddenly evaporated, “and I thought it would be well for me to

wait an hour or two before returning to business; that is, if it will not inconvenience you too much, Aunt Ann," he added, meekly. "I know you did not contract to furnish us with lunches."

"Don't speak of such a thing, my dear boy," said the kind woman, fervently, calling Rosalie, and setting an extra plate, and drawing up a chair, and pouring out a cup of tea, apparently at one and the same time.

"I do not drink tea, you know," he protested.

"Not usually, I know," said Aunt Ann, firmly; "but you will to-day, for it is very sustaining. What doctor does your uncle have?"

"I do not think he ever had one," replied Ray, settling himself in extraordinary comfort, and smiling furtively at Margery, who he at once perceived saw through his little manœuvre and was not offended.

"Well, we must not let this run on. You know, Margery," appealing to her niece, "how important it is to take things in time."

"Oh, very," assented Margery.

"How do you feel now, Ray? Stop a minute and think. Any of that sharp pain?"

Ray frowned slightly, cast his fine eyes up at the ceiling, and pondered.

"No," he finally replied; then placing a hand on his heart and meeting Aunt Ann's gaze, "nothing but an unusual heat — here."

Margery colored violently, and stifled a laugh; but Aunt Ann nodded many times.

"Exactly, Ray, exactly. That's inflammation, you

know. Now you must be very quiet, my dear, and not talk much."

"Aunt Ann is very strict, you see," said Margery. "It seems strange to me to hear you call her aunt, Mr. Ingalls."

"It makes us cousins, does it not?" asked Ray, eagerly.

Aunt Ann laughed complacently. "You will have more cousins than an Irish girl, Margery, if you adopt everybody that calls me aunt."

"I should want to make my own choice," said Margery.

"Put me in your select assortment, will you not?" begged Ray.

"You may consider yourself on trial," she replied. "I hear you are a nephew of Mr. Exton's."

"Yes. Do you know him? Oh, I remember he said he had met you once."

"Yes," said Margery, laughing; "I think he will remember it."

"Naturally," remarked Ray, gallantly.

"Aunt Ann, your nephew is very polite," said the girl, mischievously.

"Ray? Oh, yes, Ray knows how to behave when he wants to," replied Aunt Ann, approvingly.

The young people exchanged a sympathetic look and smile, Ray becoming with each moment more and more the slave of Margery's vivacious charms.

"Tell me what made the meeting so memorable; does thereby hang a tale?"

"Yes, indeed, as long as a train of cars; but I will not tell it. It is too ridiculous. I do not know you well enough."

"Oh, do. If Uncle John was ever in a ridiculous situation I want to hear about it. I can't imagine it. You know he is one of these fellows that never is ridiculous."

"Of course he never could be," said Margery, warmly. "The situation was ridiculous, but he dignified it as much as anybody could. He was perfectly lovely."

"Oh, he was!" said Ray, not relishing this sweeping praise of his kinsman, a state of mind which Margery perceived with the quickness of her sex. Her unconscious purpose now was to charm Ray, not to tease him; so she immediately took measures to banish the cloud from his brow. The first measure was a flattering glance, hitherto untried, which nature taught her on the spur of the moment, and whose effect was all she could wish.

"You must not mind my not telling you about it until — until we are better acquainted, will you?"

"No, on condition that we become better acquainted very fast indeed," he returned.

"How curious men are!" observed Margery, musingly.

"Don't you think you are talking too much, Ray?" asked Aunt Ann.

"No wonder you would like to strike me dumb," returned Ray, with a significant nod in her direction. "How long since you turned burglaress, Aunt Ann?"

"Turned what?"

Ray met her gaze with an accusing look. "Just now, upstairs, I found that one of my gloves had disappeared."

Aunt Ann stared at him for a moment; then his meaning dawned upon her.

"Yes, you did," she returned, decidedly, "and, what is more, it has disappeared for good"; and hereupon she frowned warningly at him, and shook her head.

"Miss Standish, may I tell you a romantic story with a sad ending?" pursued Ray, daringly.

"Make the ending happy, please."

"I cannot do that. Perhaps somebody else can. Listen. Yesterday I found a glove. It was a small glove, and very attractive. Aunt Ann, the evil genius of the story, refused to tell me about its owner. I then secreted it, intending at some near day to set forth, like the prince in Cinderella, and find the hand that it fitted. Now the evil genius has made off with the glove, and — well, that is all. No wonder the shock of the loss was sufficient to induce heart disease — I mean lung trouble."

"Poor prince!" said Margery, with a dancing light in her blue eyes. "But doesn't somebody say somewhere that all things come to him who knows how to wait for them?"

Ray, glowing with pleasure, looked quickly down at the hand next him. Its contour and color did not disappoint him.

Aunt Ann viewed the couple complacently. She

had a vague idea that Ray had smoothed over the affair of the glove very gracefully.

"I don't think you feel very badly now," she said to him, with kind concern, "although you haven't eaten enough for a bird."

"What kind of a bird — an ostrich?" asked Ray, laughingly. "Oh, no, I do not feel badly; but this inflammation," touching his side, "is not allayed."

"How long does it usually last?" asked Aunt Ann, looking anxiously at him over her spectacles.

"Usually about a week; but I think this is different. I feel," he added audaciously, "as though it were about to become chronic."

"What a terrible flirt," thought Margery, smiling into her cup of tea as though she saw something very amusing there.

"Oh, don't say that, dear. Nobody at your age ought to be discouraged about their health. Does lung trouble run in your family?"

"Yes, indeed," returned Ray, recklessly. "There has never been a man in my father's family that didn't have a lobe in his left lung."

"*You* — don't say so!" ejaculated Aunt Ann, setting down her teacup. "Margery, how can you laugh. You must excuse her, Ray. She's too young and flighty to know anything about real trout. Does your uncle John know that?"

"Yes."

"And does he think it's safe for you to be in business all the same?"

"He has no appearance of worrying about me. You know, Aunt Ann, we are a long-lived family in spite of it. I am a little sensitive on the subject, so please don't mention it to any one."

The hostess fixed her kind eyes upon him in a look of sympathy, which should have burned his brazen young face.

"To change the subject, Aunt Ann," he continued, "you know this young lady better than I do. How ought I to ask her to allow me to come in with you some evening and call upon her?"

"That is perfectly impossible," responded Aunt Ann, decidedly; "so don't ask it, Ray."

The latter glanced at Margery. "Even if I behave so well as to enter the list of cousins?"

"I have a stern sister," explained Margery. "I do not receive calls."

"Ah, you are not out yet?"

"As far as I ever shall be, I fear."

"Then I will call upon your sister," suggested Ray, delighted with his bright thought.

"Even more impossible," said Margery, shaking her head. "Aunt Ann, fancy Kate if Mr. Ingalls were to call her cousin!"

Aunt Ann shuddered. Her ease and complacency deserted her. She fidgeted in her chair. Poor Aunt Ann! She felt miserably beset.

"Ray," she said shortly, "do you feel able to go back to business this afternoon?"

"Oh, yes," following Aunt Ann's example and push-

ing his chair back from the table. "I feel like rior refreshed."

"Then I think you had better go at once."

"Well, that is right to the point. When," at Aunt Ann appealingly, "shall we three again?"

"Not until Kate Standish knows it, and so it," returned Aunt Ann, speaking more son than mortal had ever heard her speak before.

Margery looked at Ray with a comical but ing little sigh of regret, and held out her hand.

"Then it is a long farewell," she said.

"Do not say that, Miss Standish," he ex quickly, as he took the hand.

"Ray Ingalls, go down town," ordered Aunt all in a flutter; "and take care of yourself, dear added remorsefully.

"*Au revoir*," said that wicked Margery, glance no less reprehensible than the hope she out.

Ray smiled, flushed, pressed her hand, released and at last departed.

CHAPTER X.

MARGERY'S CONFESSION.

"You are such a procrastinator, Margery, that I don't half trust you," were Aunt Ann's parting words to her niece, when the girl finally took her leave on that afternoon. "I want to see Kate, any way. I think I'll come in to-morrow morning, and see if you have told her."

"Very well, I hope you will," was Margery's laughing response.

That evening when Kate came home she looked very tired, and replied in monosyllables to her sister's questions. After dinner the two went up to their room, and Kate lay down on the bed. It was the regular programme for her to rest thus on this evening of the week, while Margery read to her; so the latter immediately brought a book and seated herself.

"What makes you so unusually sparkling to-night, little sister?" asked Kate, with languid curiosity. "Has it been a pleasant day for you?"

"Very; but now you must be quiet, and give yourself up to rest," and Margery began in a business-like fashion to read.

No; not usually," and Margery smiled involuntarily and blushed again.

She looked at her steadily. It was a wonder, they were possessed by those lovely dark eyes. They seemed to Margery to draw her inmost thoughts up, into sight. In vain she pouted under their gaze, and mentally at Kate's youth, and recalled her own to govern her actions according to her own judgment. They held her firmly, and compelled her.

But to-day it was different," she said reluctantly.

What happened?" asked Kate encouragingly.

One of them came home."

Oh! Which was it?"

The boy."

That is good," said the other, in a tone of relief.

But," said Margery, slowly, "he is not much of a — that is, he is a great deal of a boy. I mean he grown up. He is tall, and he is nearly twenty-two."

Did Aunt Ann break her word with me?"

No, she sent me home," replied Margery, glad to get again an accusing tone. "Very agreeable for

Thank you for putting me in such a pleasant position."

It seems you were able to extricate yourself from
You stayed."

I did, because Mr. Ingalls said he was going right
to the office."

And then?"

Why, then," and Margery blushed again, "he
down stairs after we were at the table, and said

he was not feeling well, or something like that, and—and so he stayed.” She looked up at the close of her confession. Kate’s eyes were shut, and her face looked statuesquely lovely, with the long, dark lashes lying on her pale cheek.

“Sweet thing,” thought Margery, “how tired she is! How much she does for me! How much I ought to try to please her!”

“Kate, you would like Mr. Ingalls,” she said, softly and eagerly; “and he is Mr. Exton’s nephew. Mr. Exton dined there last night.”

Kate opened her eyes, and fixed them thoughtfully on Margery’s face.

“Do you think this will lead to a better acquaintance with *him*?” she asked.

“I should think it might. Why should we not hope so? Why should we not live, rather than vegetate?”

“Margery, it makes me sad to see you so sanguine, dear. Supposing you meet Mr. Exton through this avenue. Do you know how you will appear to him? As the niece of this Ray’s housekeeper, a poor girl, living shabbily, who possibly makes a visit to her aunt the excuse for enjoying the society of the frequenters of the house. Never let it be said of you, Margery, never let it be said of you!” Kate finished in a tone of positive pain.

Margery, very pale, confronted her in silence for half a minute.

“I see!” she exclaimed then. “This is your lesson day. You have seen Madam Sevrance. You have

told her about Aunt Ann. She has held up before you all sorts of horrors to be apprehended. You never, left to yourself, would have thought of that which you have just said to me. I hate that woman. I hate her!" and Margery burst into a passion of tears and sobs.

Kate gathered her into her arms and soothed her, laying her own white cheek against the flushed one, waiting patiently for the storm to be over. At last all was quiet, and she spoke again:

"Now, dear, you know where Aunt Ann lives; you have visited her, you have lunched with one of these strange men, and he has pleased you very much. The Rubicon is passed, and you are liable to do the same thing again at any time."

"As if I ever could go in there after the cruel, cruel thing you said!" exclaimed Margery, indignantly.

Kate kissed the speaker affectionately. "Oh, no, the wound is not so deep. In a few days you will have forgotten the words; but I hope a restraining influence will remain. I never again will hide anything from you, Margery. It is, as you say, treating you too much like a child. You are my dear little partner, and we must be perfectly open with each other. When I see how you blossom under a good time such as you have had to-day, it makes me wish you might have the right sort of a one often. I have made up my mind not to urge you to do this, or to refrain from doing that, any more. You must judge for yourself when and how often to visit the next house."

"And you are very much afraid to let me, too," grumbled Margery.

"You are mistaken. I want you to know that it would be very easy for your conduct to appear questionable to those very gentlemen, — I think they probably are gentlemen, as Aunt Ann says Mr. Exton chose them, — who will like you, and be kind to you, and flatter you if you let them. After you once comprehend that, and agree to it, I am not at all afraid; for, in all Boston, I believe there is not a more perfect lady from the crown of her head to the sole of her foot than my sister Margery."

Margery glowed all over with pleasure at this rare praise, and vowed to deserve it. "Oh, Kate," she said, after a pause, "I gave Aunt Ann your picture with mine. I thought you would not care. Her room was so bare."

"That was right. Are you making the scarf for her room?"

"No, for the parlor; but it will be hers, you know. Shall you not visit her soon?"

"Yes," said Kate, "probably to-morrow. You liked Aunt Ann's boy?"

"Yes, indeed. He wanted to come with Aunt Ann and call upon us some time; but I told him you would not like it."

"No, I should not like it," replied Kate, composedly.

"You would," said Margery, in her vehement way, "if you would just stop a minute and be

Kate Standish instead of the responsible sister of Margery."

Kate laughed. "Well, when I stop being the sister of Margery, I will try him."

It was quite a relief to Aunt Ann the following morning, when she called upon her nieces, to find that Margery had been faithful, and that Kate was in full possession of the facts in the case.

"I'll never make you another promise, Kate, you may be certain," she said. "I kept both of those, but what good did it do? Margery came walking right in there, and I couldn't pretend I wasn't pleased, and, although I never introduced Ray to her, there they were yesterday chatting together as sociably as two sparrows, and small harm, I think"; and Aunt Ann laughed comfortably.

Early in the afternoon Kate went into the next house, and even carried her complaisance so far as to sit down at Mr. Wiley's piano and sing a ballad in a way to make Aunt Ann wipe her eyes, enraptured.

"I wonder why you girls wouldn't come in to dinner some night? They would be so carried away with the music and all," asked the latter wistfully.

"Don't you see that we couldn't do that, Aunt Ann?" said Kate, gently; and Margery echoed with a wistful sigh.

"Oh, no, we couldn't do that."

OF NEW YORK

CHAPTER XI.

A LITTLE DIFFERENCE.

MARGERY was really impressed by that conversation with her sister. She reviewed her experience with Ray Ingalls; and while she laughed over and enjoyed the remembrance of his audacity, she honestly decided that there must be no more happenings of that sort which she could avoid. It required considerable determination to make such a resolution, for she craved, in her monotonous life, just such spice as the attention and society of that young gentleman would bring into it; and if she were to abide by her inclinations, his opportunities of meeting her would be frequent. However, even the latitude of little daytime visits to Aunt Ann was a welcome variety of which she often availed herself, sometimes accompanied by Kate, but more often alone.

Ray Ingalls, in the flush of pleasure consequent upon lunching with Margery, was so imprudent, when he returned to the office, as to confide the whole experience to his bosom friend Sharp, who listened with concentrated interest.

"You humbug! You impostor!" exclaimed the latter, at the close of the recital. "Is she as pretty as her picture?"

"A thousand times prettier," responded Ray, enthusiastically.

"H'm!" said Mr. Sharp, and said no more; but about noon of every day, for some time thereafter, he kept strict watch upon his deskmate, and, whenever Ray made quiet preparations to slip out of the office unobserved, he would say:

"Here, hold on. I'll be with you in a minute," and Ray would hesitate, then obey with a very bad grace; while Sharp, pulling on his overcoat, would smother his laughter as best he could.

One day the usual programme had been carried out, and the pair had set out for luncheon; but on the way to their favorite restaurant Ray suddenly stopped.

"By the way, Sharp, I want to go up to the house for something. Excuse me, that's a good fellow. Here's a car coming now. I shall be back as soon as you are."

"Yes, I know you will," replied Mr. Sharp, sweetly, boarding the car after him. "'What shall part us from each other?'"

"What do *you* want?" asked Ray, roughly.

"I want to see her, too, Baby. Do not speak so unkindly to me," and Mr. Sharp smiled exasperatingly.

"I don't know that she'll be there."

"No, but you think she will, from what Miss Eaton said this morning. I think so, too, my boy; so let us go together, amicably, hand in hand."

Ray glowered for a moment, then burst into a reluctant laugh. "All right, Ted, only I hope you have your excuse. *I* forgot to bring an important letter that has to be mailed. I left it on my table."

After this the couple of friends were silent until they reached their destination. Ray thought over the delightful adventure of a week ago. He had met Margery the following day on the street. She had smiled and bowed to him cordially; but had passed without speaking, and he was eager to see her again. Although at first he had grudged Sharp a meeting with her, now he rather anticipated her effect upon him, and felt a pride in letting his friend see how cordial were his relations with the pretty girl whom he claimed as his own discovery.

Hoping and fearing, he ran up the steps of the house, closely pursued by Mr. Sharp. He opened the door quietly, and immediately a re-assuring sound broke upon his ear. It was Margery's peculiarly merry and contagious laugh. He cast one brilliant look of satisfaction at his friend, and then they went in.

Ray opened the parlor door. Aunt Ann and Margery were sitting together there, the former with a large basket of clean socks in her lap, one of which she was darning industriously. Margery was putting the finishing touches to the beautiful piece of work that was to decorate the table. They both looked up upon the entrance of the young gentlemen.

"Well, who would have expected to see you two

walk in?" said Aunt Ann, complacently glancing up over her spectacles.

Ray, looking eagerly at Margery, made no answer. She had colored at the sound of the closing of the front door, instantly suspecting that Ray had arrived, and knowing that it was she who had brought him. A warm sensation of flattered pride filled her for an instant; then Ray walked in with his tall, sandy-haired companion. At first she reproached herself for her vanity, thinking that it was the arrival of some stranger, to whom he wished to show hospitality, that had brought Ray at an unseemly hour; but she was soon undeceived. Aunt Ann continued blandly:

"Margery, my niece, Miss Standish, Mr. Sharp."

So this was the "young man." Margery drew herself up with a hauteur which Kate could not have exceeded, as she recognized his respectful salutation.

"How do you do, Mr. Ingalls?" she said, in reply to the latter's bright greeting.

A mortifying idea had flashed upon her; one which would never have found entrance to her mind were it not for Madam Sevrance's worldly wisdom filtering through Kate into her unwilling ears. Its truth impressed her with conviction. She was sufficiently indignant for one minute to suit the sternest guardian. Her cheeks burned as she rose quietly and folded up her work.

"I forgot an important letter," said Ray, sending uneasy glances at Margery as he spoke. She looked pretty enough, there was no trouble about that; but

"Never mind for a few minutes, Margery," interrupted the other; "I want to talk a little. I imagine from your looks that you will be more interesting than anybody's essays to-night. Has Aunt Ann been here?"

"No," replied Margery, without giving herself time to dread the disclosure, "I have been there. I saw Aunt Ann go into the next house yesterday morning. Why," she continued adroitly, "did you try to deceive me?"

"I wanted time to think, Margery. So you have been there?"

"Yes, twice. Yesterday and to-day," replied the other, slowly coloring under Kate's steady regard.

"You ought to have told me last night."

"You ought to have told me yesterday noon," retorted Margery, trying to nurse a sustaining sensation of injury. "You cannot treat me like a baby any more, Kate, and you need not try."

"And Aunt Ann invited you to come again to-day?"

"She invited me to go down town with her this morning and buy material for a table-scarf, which I am going to embroider for her, and then invited us both to lunch."

"Ah, she thought you had told me," said Kate, in a gratified tone. "I am glad she thought that."

"Oh, yes, and scolded me because I hadn't. I told her you could not come to lunch anyway."

"But you lunched with her?"

"Yes."

"None of her family come home at noon?"

"No; not usually," and Margery smiled involuntarily, and blushed again.

Kate looked at her steadily. It was a wonder, the power possessed by those lovely dark eyes. They seemed to Margery to draw her inmost thoughts up, out, into sight. In vain she pouted under their gaze, scoffed mentally at Kate's youth, and recalled her own right to govern her actions according to her own judgment. They held her firmly, and compelled her.

"But to-day it was different," she said reluctantly.

"What happened?" asked Kate encouragingly.

"One of them came home."

"Ah! Which was it?"

"The boy."

"That is good," said the other, in a tone of relief.

"But," said Margery, slowly, "he is not much of a boy—that is, he is a great deal of a boy. I mean he is grown up. He is tall, and he is nearly twenty-two."

"Did Aunt Ann break her word with me?"

"No, she sent me home," replied Margery, glad to adopt again an accusing tone. "Very agreeable for me. Thank you for putting me in such a pleasant position."

"It seems you were able to extricate yourself from it. You stayed."

"I did, because Mr. Ingalls said he was going right back to the office."

"And then?"

"Why, then," and Margery blushed again, "he came down stairs after we were at the table, and said

"If that is the way you receive a civil answer, you can have the conversation all to yourself," remarked the other, equably. "One question more, since we are in for it; what time do they have lunch at this caravansary? Miss Standish's snub has, unfortunately, not deprived me of my appetite."

"But we have driven her away, Ted," said Ray, in distress. "She went because we came."

His companion smiled. "Yes, I perceived that myself."

"But why should she?"

Mr. Sharp shrugged his shoulders, and gave a self-satisfied glance toward the mirror. "There's no accounting for tastes," he replied, with a jaunty air, which he suddenly relinquished. "At the same time," he added, "I feel rather small, — a sort of a right-man-in-the-wrong-place feeling, you know."

"I cannot even be sure that I am the right man," returned Ray, with feeble pleasantry. "One thing is certain," he continued, emphatically, "this is the last of hanging around the house in the daytime, — like Kits, there," and he raised the cat slightly on the toe of his boot, an indignity which the respectable animal resented with a "meow" of surprise. At the same moment, the rustle of women's skirts was heard on the staircase, the front door slammed, and Aunt Ann appeared, her cheerful countenance bright as ever.

"We'll walk right down, young men," she said. "Rosalie will be ready for us, and I dare say you're in a hurry."

"This is an imposition, Aunt Ann," said Ray, warmly, "and one that you shall not suffer from again."

"I am very sorry we frightened Miss Standish away," added Mr. Sharp, politely.

Aunt Ann laughed. "Oh, girls are notional," she said. "She don't stay very often, though I thought she would to-day."

But Ray was far from being consoled, and made but a morose third at Aunt Ann's cosey table.

On the other side of the partition, Margery, very red-cheeked, consumed her bread and butter and apple sauce in quite as gloomy a spirit. She went directly to her room after lunch, and took out some sewing, at which she worked for some time with surprising industry. Her thoughts, unpleasing as they were, absorbed her, until a knock at her door, about four o'clock, interrupted them.

Answering the call, a note and a square pasteboard box were put into her hands. In surprise she closed the door, set the box on a chair, and opened the note. It read as follows:—

DEAR MISS STANDISH, — I am so unhappy in the knowledge of having offended you that I cannot resist writing immediately to ask you to tell me what I have done. Until I receive your answer I shall not know a comfortable moment. Do have the charity to leave a note for me with your aunt if I may not come in and see you. I am eager to apologize, or to do anything else that will restore me to your favor.

Yours hopefully,

RAY INGALLS.

As Margery read this, her cheeks flamed redder.

"There is no ground for your hopefulness, Mr. Ingalls," she murmured, and then turned her attention to the box. Removing the cover and a layer of cotton, her eyes were greeted by beautiful roses, red, yellow, white, and pink, freshly cut, with long stems, and green leaves.

A delighted exclamation burst from her lips, and she fell on her knees before them in eager pleasure. No one had ever sent her flowers before. It was so long since she had owned a rose in the winter! Ray Ingalls would have been elated could he have seen the reception of his gift, one which would not stir the pulses of a young lady in society, but which brought to Margery temporary forgetfulness of every disagreeable feature of her life.

She was still arranging the lovely blossoms when her sister came home, and she laughed outright at the blank wonder expressed in the latter's face.

"Where did they come from?" asked Kate.

"Mr. Ingalls sent them just now."

"I wonder what he did that for."

"Might he not send me flowers simply from politeness?" asked Margery. The note was safe in her pocket, and she had nearly forgotten it until Kate spoke.

"He might, still it is an unusual attention from one who is so nearly a stranger. Did you lunch with Aunt Ann?"

"No, I intended to do so, but Mr. Ingalls came home, and I, — I came home, too."

Margery tried to speak lightly, but her lips trembled. She did not intend to take Kate into her confidence, neither did she intend to alleviate Mr. Ray Ingalls' sufferings. "Let him suffer," she thought, hard-heartedly. "If he really does, it will do him good."

"That was very wise and nice in you, little sister," said Kate, lifting a rosebud with her finger-tips. "And the young man appears to have thought so, too. Are those a reward of merit? I shall have to make Mr. Ingalls' acquaintance, if he is going to send my sister such presents as this."

"I am not afraid to have you meet him," said Margery. "He *appears* very well," she added, severely.

Kate smiled, and then grew serious; but, although she looked inquiringly at her sister, Margery did not glance up from her industrious stitch, — stitching.

On that evening there was another knock at the door of the Misses Standish, and a servant announced that a young gentleman was waiting in the parlor to see Miss Kate. Kate took the card from her hand and read thereon, "Ray Ingalls."

"Are you sure he asked for me?"

"Perfectly, mum."

"Very well," and as she closed the door Kate turned to Margery, whose eyes looked large and bright.

"Isn't this very strange, Margery?"

"Perhaps he has a message from Aunt Ann," suggested the other.

"True; I did not think of that," and Kate went down stairs without further delay.

In the parlor, under the rather dim light vouchsafed by Mrs. Brown's economically contrived gas-burners, a young man came forward to meet her.

"Miss Standish," he said, bowing respectfully.

Kate held his card and did not offer him her hand.

"Take a seat, Mr. Ingalls," she returned, politely, seating herself. "I presume my aunt has sent you to me?"

"No," returned Ray, remaining standing, and looking very straight and handsome in his dingy surroundings. "I know that I am taking a liberty, and until I hear whether you pardon it I will not sit down. No one sent me. I want very much to see your sister, and I came in to ask you if I might."

Kate repressed a smile. Evidently reports of her strict discipline had penetrated to the next house. She liked Ray's looks and she liked his direct manner; but he confirmed her suspicion that some trouble had occurred between him and Margery at even this early stage of their acquaintance.

"You see, I asked her," continued Ray in his honest, boyish way, "to write me a note if I might not come in and see her, and as she did not write any note I concluded I might come."

Kate bit her lip. She was amused as well as puzzled. "I will take any message to her," she said.

"A message would not do. I wrote to her this afternoon and she would not answer my question, so

I do not believe she would pay any attention to a message."

"Perhaps she does not wish to see you," suggested Kate.

"I am quite sure she does not," returned the other, candidly. "But I cannot rest until I know what I have done to offend her. I do not know at all, you understand, Miss Standish; and I must know."

Kate smiled. "You talk like one very much accustomed to having his own way, Mr. Ingalls."

Ray met her eyes and gleaned encouragement. He admired her very much. She was the most queenly young lady he had ever seen, even in her very plain garments, and at another time he would have been occupied with the pleasure of meeting and talking with one whom he had long admired at a distance; but now, his thoughts were full of Margery. At an age when it is necessary to have an adored object, he had chosen her for his ideal, and surrounded her with every charm that his fancy could conjure. He had been in a *crescendo* state of misery ever since noon. He could not go meekly home now without having had his doubts set at rest. It was too much to ask of him.

"Do you not think, Miss Standish, that if she is offended she owes it to me, who am so anxious that we should be friends, to give a reason for it?"

"No," returned Kate. "You can have met my sister but very few times. I do not think she owes you anything. However, I will see if she is willing to see you," and she rose.

The young fellow's unhappy face softened her. "Good evening, Mr. Ingalls," she added, holding out her hand. "I pardon the liberty you have taken, so I hope you will not refuse longer to be seated."

Ray shook hands with her gratefully, and, when she had gone, dropped into one of the faded green rep chairs. Several minutes passed before Margery came down. Evidently she had taken time to change her mind again and again, but finally she appeared, holding her head well up, and carrying the pasteboard box in her hands.

Ray rose eagerly at her approach. "Thank you so much for coming," he said, almost before she had entered the room. "You cannot wonder that I came for an answer to my note."

"Thank you for these beautiful flowers," returned Margery, with freezing dignity.

"Oh, bother the flowers—excuse me, I am delighted if you thought them beautiful, or cared anything about them; but I want to be forgiven."

"Mr. Ingalls, it is hard for me to forgive you," said the girl, seriously. "Here are the flowers. I cannot accept them. I thought you liked me a little and respected me a little when we parted the other day." And she laid the box on the chair beside which her visitor stood.

"Like you? respect you?" burst forth Ray. "I don't know whether those are the words I should select."

Margery shook her head with a little scornful smile. "They are not the words I should select, now."

"For pity's sake, explain!" ejaculated the other.

Margery had taken the precaution to close the door, so that the little conference should be private, and now she stood erect before him.

"You came home at noon to-day because you suspected that I was to be there." She blushed very much as she said this, but maintained a firm front.

"Yes, I did; you would not let me call. I wanted to see you very much. I did not think it would offend you." Ray was also red in the face, also firm. "You were so kind to me before."

"Yes; you were an old acquaintance of my aunt's. I was prepossessed in your favor. Indeed, it would have been difficult to make me believe that you would do what you did to-day — bring home a strange man to stare at me."

As Margery said these words, she put into them an indignation and disgust before which Ray fell back in utter dismay.

"I — do that!"

"Did you not? Can you say that Mr. Sharp did not come home at an unusual hour for that very purpose?"

"But I did not bring him," gasped Ray.

"He could only have thought it worth while to come on your recommendation," continued Margery, pitilessly. "Very likely you promised him that I was very good fun, or good-looking, or something like that. Whether you brought him or not, you allowed him to come, which throws sufficient light on the estimation

in which you hold me. Good evening, Mr. Ingalls." And, with a distant bow, Margery stalked from the room, leaving the enemy discomfited and speechless, standing in the middle of the floor.

"Well, dear," said Kate, inquiringly, when her sister returned, "has he gone?"

"No," replied Margery, breathing a little faster from the effort of saying to her visitor what she had determined to say.

"And you came off and left him?" asked Kate, amazed. "Why, what is all this?"

"Well, I will tell you. I did not mean to, but I will." And Margery, seating herself, related the story of her grievances, ending with a report of her recent conversation with Ray. Had Kate heard the facts before she had met the defendant in the case, she would probably have sympathized wholly with Margery, and rejoiced at the spirit in which her sister resented the liberty taken by the young man; but Kate could picture Ray's dismayed countenance at hearing Margery's charges, and at seeing the implacability with which she swept from the room. In spite of herself she smiled into her sister's shining eyes.

"You see it was just one of the positions in which I have feared that Aunt Ann's experiment would place us," said Kate; "and you have done right, only perhaps it was a little rude in you to leave our caller to find his own way out. Let him be guilty of all the rudeness. I do not believe from his manner that he realized that he was in fault."

was terribly cross to him," remarked Margery, busily.

"Well, you have given our neighbors a salutary lesson at all events," said Kate; "they will be likely to teach you henceforth with great discretion."

"I suppose Mr. Ingalls thinks I am a virago," was Margery's thoughtful response.

"Well, you can bear that," laughed Kate. "He is a looking boy. As you say, he *appears* very well; of course, now you have seen the last of him."

Margery looked suddenly dismayed. "Oh, I hardly thought that," she said.

"He will not recover from this rebuff very soon," Kate, carelessly. "If you have erred, it was on the safe side, dear. It was very nice of you to feel the necessity of their behavior."

CHAPTER XII.

AN UMBRELLA AND A ROSE.

WHEN Margery wakened the following morning, it was with the sensation that something was wrong. There was a cloud over her, and it did not take many minutes for her to define the vague discomfort. She had quarrelled with Aunt Ann's boy; the first person whose acquaintance had promised to contribute some variety and pleasure to the humdrum life she abhorred. Kate's approval was rare and delightful; but had it not been darkened by a decided doubt of Margery's discretion? An approving conscience was a tower of strength; but did hers now proclaim her virtue with quite so loud a flourish of trumpets as on last evening?

The day was dull, and a wet, drizzling snow was falling, under which circumstances Mrs. Brown's back yard looked least inviting. Margery gazed out dolefully, and as her eyes wandered over the fence into Aunt Ann's neater premises, she wondered whether her ill-used neighbor were possibly also studying the dismal scene. But she had not much time to indulge in reminiscence and regret. It was one of the morn-

gs when Kate had to make an early start, and Margery, as usual, bustled about, getting overshoes, waterproof and umbrella in readiness, and doing all she could to save her sister's time and strength. She bade Kate good-bye at the street door with many a moan over the weather.

"You know I do not mind it," replied the latter, who was in remarkably good spirits. "Good-bye, little partner. You do not know how pleased I am to find that you have so much self-respect and so good an idea of defending our position — in short," added Kate, running down the steps, "that you are so valiant."

"But with so little of the better part of valor," remarked Margery, with a dubious air.

The door of the next house slammed, and Messrs. Ray Ingalls and Edward Sharp descended to the street. The former carried himself with an air which suggested that Aunt Ann had mingled buckram and ramrods with his breakfast. On previous mornings, from behind the parlor curtains Margery had occasionally amused herself with watching the scrutinizing glances which her admirer bestowed upon the house as he set forth for business. But this morning he did not turn his head. Stiffly he took off his hat to Kate, assisted her into a car, and followed with his friend.

Margery started back and closed the door, hurrying into the parlor for one peep out the window. Her curiosity received no satisfaction. The horse-car moved on, moist and dingy in the muddy street, and

she could get no glimpse of its occupants. What a desolate day! What an ugly, commonplace row of houses was opposite! What an odious, dark room Mrs. Brown's parlor was! Margery looked around it with a grimace. Ah, there on the chair where she had placed it the night before was the pasteboard box. She lifted the cover, uttering an exclamation. The poor roses lay wilted and forlorn. She looked at them with tears in her eyes for their lost beauty, and, carrying them up to her room, clipped off the ends of their stems and placed them in water. While she was thus occupied, her thoughts reviewed the events of last evening. The color came to her cheeks as she pictured Ray standing deserted in the parlor, and finally finding his way alone out of the inhospitable mansion.

"What will he think of me," she murmured half aloud, in a climax of self-disgust. "I could have done it so much better. Now I have been quite as rude as he was. His very back looked angry just now. I will not let it go on so. I will set myself right. He shall not have ground for saying that I am as bad as he is," and Margery, impulsive as usual, sat down with her writing-desk, and penned the following note:

MR. INGALLS, — I little thought, so soon after criticising your offence, to be led to apologize for one of my own; but indeed I am very sorry that I was sufficiently carried away by my feelings last evening to leave you so abruptly. It was very childish, and I regret it very much. I hope you will excuse me.

Yours sincerely,

MARGERY STANDISH.

As much relieved by the writing of this missive as though it had already performed its purpose, Margery folded it, sighing deeply, and then addressed herself to the duties of the day. Some time before dinner she meant to get the note to its destination. Indeed, she would like to run in with it immediately, but she conscientiously refrained.

"I am getting too vagabondish altogether," she thought, and straightway went about putting her room in order. When this was accomplished, she took out an accumulation of odd jobs, and sat down with the high-piled basket beside the window with its dismal prospect.

"No fear of my attention wandering from the subject in hand, at any rate," she thought, with one glance of repugnance at the gradually lessening snow. Working away, an industrious little figure, her lips wore a half smile, while her thoughts ran on in an interesting groove and she occasionally lifted her head to glance at the clump of limp roses, some of whose lovely faces were brightening under her treatment. After a couple of hours of this, she became restless and longed for some one to talk to. Her nearly daily intercourse with Aunt Ann had weakened her ability to pass hours of loneliness philosophically.

"How absurd that she should be sitting alone there, and I alone here," she thought. "It is nearly noon. I believe I will try to get her to come in and lunch with me."

The girl looked out. The fast melting snow had

ceased. All was still, and gray, and humid. She had several times before this leaned from her window and summoned Aunt Ann by rapping on the neighboring one. Unless the housekeeper happened to be below stairs, she never failed to hear and answer the call.

"That is what I will do," said Margery, starting up; "she must come over to lunch with me. It will make her appreciate her own cooking the more."

She went to the closet for her umbrella in its trim case, threw a shawl about her, and opened the window. Fortunately the houses were narrow. By leaning perilously far out she could tap the neighboring sash or pane and make herself heard. Carrying out her usual programme she now reached over and knocked once, twice, without success, waiting between the calls to give Aunt Ann time to come in from her room. Growing somewhat impatient she braced herself, leaned out a trifle farther, and gave a sharper blow, when, just as she was drawing the umbrella back for a repetition, the besieged window flew up.

"Here! Who are you? What are you doing?" demanded a man's voice savagely, as Ray Ingalls thrust his head out.

Margery gave a little scream, nearly losing her balance in her surprise, while the umbrella waved wildly for a moment, clinked against the brick wall, and then fell, striking the dividing fence, and bounding into Aunt Ann's yard.

"Miss Standish," ejaculated Ray, gazing in extreme surprise at the girl on her perch.

"Yes, and you have nearly sent me after the umbrella," she answered, laughing. "I was calling Aunt Ann. Forgive me, won't you? Of course I could have no idea you would be at home at this hour of the day."

This unfortunate addition caused both of them to flush violently.

"Especially after last evening," answered Ray, stiffly, his position, hands resting on window-sill, and body protruding into mid-air, not altogether compatible with an effective showing of injured dignity. "Nothing but one of the violent headaches to which I am subject would have brought me to-day, and even then I rang the bell and inquired of Rosalie whether I should intrude upon you by coming in. Rest assured it was the farthest thing from my intention."

"And then I upset all your plans by beating upon your window. It is a shame," declared Margery, sparkling and beaming in a way to cause her interlocutor to wonder if she could be the same person who loaded him with contumely only last evening. "I have just been writing to you," she continued.

"Ah!" returned Ray. "Did you leave the room last night before you had finished all you had to say?"

"Oh, do not speak of it that way," said the girl, with a charming, coaxing air. "You will see when you read my note how sorry I was for my ill temper, although now of course there is no need at all of your having the note."

"Yes, yes, indeed," replied Ray, hastily, forgetting,

as he looked at Margery's fresh face above the folds of the Rob Roy shawl, to be as distant as his injuries demanded. "The note is mine. I," smiling reluctantly, "I want to see your humility in black and white. I imagine it is a novel sight."

"But I cannot get it to you now. My umbrella has deserted. Besides, perhaps you overrate my humility," added Margery, more seriously; "I meant every word I said to you last night, but I am sorry to have been so impolite at the last."

"I think I am rather glad you were," said Ray, easily mollified. "It gives us an opportunity to forgive mutually. I am willing to do anything in your company."

"Then go back into the house," returned Margery, abruptly. "You are pale as a ghost. I ought not to have let you talk to me a minute," and she jumped down from the sill.

"Wait, Miss Standish, please. The note, you know. I have to endure tortures for a couple of hours. You can't refuse me the note."

"But how —" began Margery, popping her pretty head out again.

"Here is a cane," and Ray held one toward her. She accepted it and temporarily disappeared.

Taking the freshest and best looking of the roses, and pinning its stem to her envelope, she took the slim ebony cane with its chased gold handle, and, driving its point through the note, passed it back to its owner.

"I am so sorry for your head," she said, gently.

Ray was very white as he smiled his thanks. "Is the rose one of mine?" he asked eagerly.

"Now it is," she replied evasively, but relented, seeing his pallor. "Yes, I rescued them," she added. "Good-bye. Aunt Ann will take care of you, of course."

"Yes indeed, she is very kind,—and so are you," then both windows closed, and Margery sat down to think it over. It seemed as though she were always having some little thing to think over in these days. But suddenly she remembered her cherished umbrella soaking into the damp ground, and started up. She had just time before lunch to rescue it. In five minutes more she was standing at Miss Eaton's basement door, ringing the bell. She hoped to accomplish her errand without meeting Aunt Ann, but as luck would have it the latter was descending the basement stairs at the moment when Rosalie admitted the visitor.

"Margery, is it you, dear?" she said in a hushed voice. "Poor Ray is up stairs with such a headache. I am just going to get some hot water and wring out cloths to put on his head. You have come in to lunch with me. Go right into the dining-room and I—"

"No, Aunt Ann, I didn't come in to lunch. I dropped something out of my window into your back yard. I am going to get it, and then right home. Do not pay any attention to me. I know you ought to hurry. I am so sorry for Mr. Ingalls."

But Aunt Ann was over the kitchen stove when

Margery came in with her umbrella, whose neat case was all wet and stained.

"Dropped your umbrella out of the window, my dear!" exclaimed the former, looking over her spectacles. "How ever did you manage that?"

"The law of gravitation managed it for me," replied the girl, demurely. "Can I do anything at all to help you?"

"No, dear, no; but I wish you'd stay if you can. You might read to the poor boy when he feels better. I suppose he'll want it. Sick folks always do; and I am the poorest hand. I can't seem to keep my thoughts from running onto something else. Even poor pa's patience used to give out. 'Ann,' he'd say, 'you can do most things; but you can't read any more than Kits.' Well, I must go up," and Aunt Ann seized her pitcher of boiling water and hurried up the stairs, while Margery stooped to caress the cat, reposing in a safe corner close to the stove and out of Rosalie's way.

"Isn't he a splendid fellow?" she asked of the latter.

"Miss Eaton thinks so," responded Rosalie, grimly. "I can't abide cats, and never could; but he rules the roost here, you may be sure. I suppose I shall spread lunch for you, Miss Margery, if so be you're goin' to stay and tend the sick."

Margery caught the smile that accompanied this suggestion, and rose hastily from her stooping posture.

"No, I cannot stay to-day," she replied briefly, and immediately left the house.

When Kate came home she gave her a graphic account of her morning's interview with their neighbor; and Kate listened with interest and laughed heartily. She uttered no word of criticism or of disappointment that the estrangement, of which she had privately hoped much, had proved of so short duration.

"And now I have to make a new case for my umbrella," said Margery, dolefully.

"Is that a high price to pay for your reconciliation?"

"No, perhaps not; but I shall never dare to knock for Aunt Ann any more, and that *is* an inconvenience. Mr. Ingalls will have to be very nice to repay me."

CHAPTER XIII.

BAD NEWS.

ONE day, some weeks after peace had been restored, Margery met Ray in the street. He had received no encouragement, either from Aunt Ann or any one else, to repeat his call at the next house; and his glimpses of Margery had been few and far between. His face lighted with pleasure when they met, and he stood still, compelling her to pause and shake hands with him.

"I am going your way," he said, "if you will let me."

"Very well," she replied; "but my errand will not interest you. I am going to buy some flannel."

"Oh, yes! for the poor, I suppose," said Ray, with some vague association of ideas.

"Yes," returned Margery, raising her eyebrows and smiling, "for two of the poor."

"I have been wanting to see you very much the past few days," continued Ray, as they walked along. "If you were not as unapproachable as the princess in a fairy tale, I should have come in to see you last evening."

Margery laughed. "I have a beautiful dragon, at any rate," she said.

"Yes, and it is about a danger that threatens your sister that I wished to see you."

Margery turned to him with sudden apprehension.

"I ought not to call it danger perhaps. I don't know how she will regard it. Does she value her position in the choir?"

"Yes, indeed."

"Well, I am afraid she is on the eve of losing it."

Margery flushed and then turned pale; but she answered quietly:

"You would be likely to have correct information on that point from your uncle. Does Kate not satisfy them?"

"I have not said a word to Uncle John about it," replied Ray. "The fact is I was too much vexed with him for favoring the change. All I know is what I heard two ladies of the congregation saying about it. You know your sister is quite young to be singing with the others of that quartette."

"I know," murmured Margery; "she would never have been there but for Madam Sevrance. But her voice balances," she added, more confidently. "There is never any feeling of inadequacy about it — to me."

"Nor to me," returned Ray, warmly. "It is beautiful. Everybody has praised it until now; but here is the trouble. Miss B —, who, you know, has been singing so long in light opera, has withdrawn from the stage and is open for a church engagement. She has

a big, dramatic, mature voice, and, according to what I heard these ladies say, the music committee are eager to secure her. Indeed, they implied that the change was to be effected soon."

Margery's transparent face revealed her distress, and confirmed Ray's suspicions that this loss would be a very serious matter to his fair neighbors. He flushed high with generous sympathy; but he spoke as lightly as he was able.

"There is one good thing about it. Plenty of other churches would be glad to secure such a prize as Miss Standish."

"Yes, but few others pay nearly so high a salary as she gets now," returned the girl artlessly.

Ray's heart beat fast. The idea of its being within the range of possibility that Margery should need money; Margery, for whom it would be the highest privilege and honor to provide. He looked with fervent eyes at her pretty, drooping face, and so doing ran into a corpulent pedestrian, whose growls and maledictions roused them both from reverie.

"Perhaps I had better have said nothing," observed Ray, miserably.

"You have done right and very kindly," replied the girl. "If Kate is well prepared, that will make the trial much less. Do not come in with me," she added, with an effort at cheerfulness, as they reached her destination, "it would only bore you."

"But when shall I see you again?" asked her companion, regarding her anxiously.

"How can I tell," she returned, lightly. "Such very near neighbors cannot long miss one another."

"Do not say that. You know it is nonsense" he answered.

Margery rather enjoyed his dissatisfaction.

"You will soon have no time to miss me. Aunt Ann tells me you are becoming very gay; that your uncle is introducing you into society, and that invitations are beginning to come in numerous as the sands of the sea."

"Why do I never meet you?"

"For the best of reasons," laughed Margery. "I am not in society. Good-bye."

"Well, good-bye," he said, reluctantly, holding the hand she offered in a clinging grasp. "I think it is rather hard on me that you never go anywhere."

"Then what is it to me?" asked Margery, comically. "Do you not suppose I would *like* to go out, and dress beautifully, and drive a great deal, and not rise till noon? I should like now to be going to buy gorgeous costumes for Kate and me, instead of four yards of Shaker flannel," and, with a little grimace, the girl nodded and entered the store, leaving Ray to turn gloomily in the direction of the office.

Margery's face changed back to its expression of anxiety when she was alone. Beautiful, hard-working, cheerful Kate. What a thunderbolt she must cast at her feet to-night!

She smiled scornfully at the flannel which the clerk unfolded before her, and yet it was a good piece, quite

as good as could be expected for fifty cents a yard. She was thinking of Mr. Exton.

"And I was foolish enough to believe that he remembered that we were in existence, and would take an interest in our fate. Ah, Kate was right. Kate is always right," she thought.

Arrived at home, it was Aunt Ann's steps she ascended instead of her own, and soon she was plunged into a recital of Ray's bad news, her hands clasped in the hard, sympathetic ones of her aunt, whose spectacles were pushed up, while her kindly face expressed a troubled interest in the tale.

"I don't know what we shall do," finished Margery. "Of course there are a dozen applicants pressing for every vacancy. If it were not for Madam Sevrance the case would be hopeless; but even she cannot work miracles, and there is no telling how long Kate may have to wait."

"Well, well, I declare it's unfortunate," said Aunt Ann; "but, Margery," and she patted the girl's hand with huge satisfaction, "I am not poor, my dear. I have something laid by for a rainy day, and you and Kate are all the children I have. Don't you worry, nor don't you let Kate worry."

Margery kissed the speaker's cheek. "Thank you, dear Aunt Ann; but while we are both well, you know we would not touch your rainy-day money. Why, even *I* would not do that," she added, with a little laugh. "We are not at the end of our resources, You do not know yet how many things

I can teach," tossing her head with an assumption of conceit.

Aunt Ann regarded her with mild thoughtfulness, and a bright idea suddenly entered her mind.

"Well, I must not sit here wasting my time," said the girl, rising briskly. "Promise not to worry over two healthy, able-bodied nieces, or I shall not feel at liberty to run to you with every little trouble."

Aunt Ann gave her a loving hug, and held the street door open to watch her go down the steps. When the latter turned to ascend her own, they exchanged cheerful nods, and then Aunt Ann closed the door.

Returning to her room, she sat down and took Kits in her lap. She could think better with her hand resting on his sleek fur.

"I don't see what harm it could do," she said at length aloud. "I believe I'll go, and I suppose the sooner its done the better. Get down, Kits. I'm going on a diplomatic errand, sir, and I must make myself look right for it."

This Aunt Ann accordingly did; and when her best garments were donned, and she had drawn on a new pair of black kids, nearly as roomy as the old ones, for Aunt Ann always said she must have room to breathe, she bade Rosalie good-bye, shut Kits into the warmest room in the house, and set forth on her errand.

Taking a horse-car, she rode into the heart of the city. Then, after consulting a card which she had taken from Ray's room, she found her way to an im-

posing stone building, and ascended a flight of stairs. Opening a heavy door at her right, she walked into a large, handsome room, full of railings and desks, where half a dozen men looked up at her entrance. Among them were Mr. Wiley, Mr. Sharp, and Ray Ingalls. The latter immediately came forward.

"What is it, Aunt Ann?" he said, shaking hands with her cordially.

"I want to see your uncle if I can."

Ray evinced every symptom of terror.

"Has my time come? What have I been doing?"

"You'll know some day," replied Aunt Ann, curtly.

Ray laughed and brought forward a chair.

"Then excuse me, and I will find out if he is disengaged. Sit down here, please."

Aunt Ann had plenty to admire in the elegant appointments of the office, and waited without the least perturbation until the time when Ray returned, and ushered her into the private room beyond, where Mr. Exton gravely rose to greet her.

Aunt Ann was too simple-hearted to be awed by his manner or surroundings. She would welcome him into her domains whenever he liked to present himself there, and she took it for granted that her hospitable attitude was reciprocated.

"What a fine place you've got here," she said, shaking hands with him. "I suppose you're very busy, and dread to see a woman come in in business hours." She took the seat he offered her. "But I

ain't any great talker, and I'll be quick about it. I came to see you about my niece Kate."

"Miss Standish!"

"Yes, that's the one, the one that sings in church. I want to find out whether you like her!"

Mr. Exton, who had reseated himself with his arm resting on his desk, here looked up and met the speaker's eyes in amazement, while a faint red color stole slowly up over his dark face.

"That's all," continued Aunt Ann, simply. "I don't want to take your time. Just answer yes or no. Do you like her?"

Exton looked instinctively at the heavy door to be sure it was closed. Once certain that such was the case, his complete mystification could not prevent his smiling into his visitor's anxious face.

"There could be but one answer to that, Miss Eaton, I am sure, provided I knew Miss Standish; but I have spoken with her but twice. I cannot flatter myself that I know her."

"'Tain't necessary that you should know her," responded Aunt Ann, shaking her head a trifle impatiently. "That isn't the point. The point is that you hired her to sing in your church, Margery told me so; and if you liked her well enough for that *then*, why do you turn her away now?" Aunt Ann put out the palm of one of her black gloves in a jerky gesture of inquiry as she added, "Don't she sing as well as she ever did?"

Mr. Exton moved his chair a trifle nearer his ques-

tioner. "What is this?" he asked, with interest, concentrating his serious, pleasant gaze on Aunt Ann's face. "You must have been misinformed."

"Not you alone, of course. But the committee are going to send her away, so we hear. Mr. Exton!" Aunt Ann threw herself instinctively on the nobility and strength she saw in his face. "Mr. Exton, it will be a blow to Kate to lose that place. Perhaps you didn't know that she and Margery support themselves after having been brought up in the lap of luxury. Their father was a speculator. He married my sister and then separated her from all her relatives. A purse-proud man he was. If it wasn't business hours I'd tell you all about it; but no matter now. My sister died long ago; and as soon as the girls' father had lost all he had, he went and died too. It was just like him exactly. He never thought of anybody but himself. Well, well, of course I suppose he couldn't help it; but it *looked* that way." Aunt Ann wiped her eyes hurriedly. "If you knew how good Kate is, and what tender care she takes of Margery, and what a lovely, high spirit she has, and how hard she works, you'd let her keep that place, Mr. Exton, unless you really don't like her."

Exton nodded sympathetically; and there was a light in his eyes, kindled there by Aunt Ann's eulogy.

"Miss Standish's voice is charming. She does her work well. If there is a movement on foot to displace her, it is unknown to me," he replied, kindly.

"And to her too, poor child, so far," replied Aunt

Ann. "Margery heard of it to-day, and told me about it. It was my own idea coming to you."

"Where did Miss Margery learn this?"

"Ray told her. He heard them talking it over at the church."

"Ah!" Exton dropped his eyes a moment, then looked up again. "The young man knows your nieces?"

"Yes." Aunt Ann laughed easily at some recollection. "He doesn't see much of them. Kate has queer notions. She don't encourage new friends much of any." Here the speaker resumed her anxious expression. "I hope you can do something for her. We shall be very grateful."

Mr. Exton smiled. "This is all news to me so I cannot promise anything but my influence. Nothing definite can be done without my knowledge, and I—well, I shall make a great effort to retain Miss Standish."

Aunt Ann's countenance brightened. She arose, and Mr. Exton followed her example.

"You've relieved my mind wonderfully; but I don't want to urge you, you know, if you don't like her," she said, doubtfully.

Mr. Exton smiled as he shook her honest hand.

"I do like her," he replied, heartily, and when Aunt Ann, beaming with content, had disappeared, and the oaken door was closed behind her, he sat down at his desk to find his pulses accelerated by the declaration. He recalled Kate's pale face as it looked

every Sunday; as it looked when she rejected his offer to call upon her sister.

Her youth and beauty were sufficiently marked to have made her often a theme for conversation among the people of the church. He had been accustomed to hearing comments upon her, and they had seldom been favorable. Many a lady of the society would have entertained and made a pet of the young singer temporarily, but that such attentions were sure to be nipped in the bud. Perfectly approachable in a business relation, all attempts to draw her out socially had failed.

The young man was recalling this and wondering what it had to do with the effort to remove her from the choir, when a message was again brought that a lady wished to speak with him. There was a decided impatience in his manner as he nodded assent.

In a minute in walked the stately figure of an elderly lady; tall, with her white hair dressed *à la Pompadour*. She was dressed in a luxurious garment of seal-skin, which covered her from head to foot, and a close bonnet of fine feathers. At sight of her strong face, with its brilliant black eyes, Mr Exton rose with ready cordiality.

"Madam Sevrance, this is indeed a pleasant surprise."

"Yes, yes, I suppose so," replied the new-comer, brusquely, shaking hands with him, and then taking the chair vacated a short time since by Aunt Ann. "What is this about Miss Standish being supplanted

in the choir at the 'Apostles?'" she continued, pinning him with her flashing eyes.

Mr. Exton deliberately reseated himself. "I do not know what it is," he replied.

"You mean that you didn't know anything about it?"

"Precisely; until a few minutes ago, when her aunt attacked me about as you are doing now."

"Oh, yes, her aunt," repeated Madam Sevrance, meditating. "I've heard of the aunt; an amiable rural personage. Well, I can tell you what about it," she added, with an excited gesture, "I see through the whole thing. They don't like Kate in the church, nor in the choir, because they aren't good enough for her. What sort of companion is she for Miss K——, the contralto, with her red face and her coarse ways? It annoys the choir to have her behave herself through the service, while they are drawing caricatures and writing notes. Miss K—— would rather have Miss B——, of the opera, of course; but of course *she* wouldn't have anything to do with it. The idea is that Miss B—— has more fame and more voice; but I tell you, John," and the excited woman gave a quick shake of her head, "she can't sing in tune. I mean she can't *always* sing in tune. Now, Kate can't do otherwise. Did you ever hear her get off pitch?" Here she pointed a searching finger at her listener.

"Never," he responded, with gratifying promptness.

"The most important fact of all is that Miss B—— will come cheap. They can get her for less than they

can my little Kate. She has offered herself for less."

"Perhaps Miss Standish would lower her price," suggested Mr. Exton, "if —"

"Never!" exclaimed the other, in ringing tones. "She sha'n't take less there. If she goes elsewhere, she will have to. She needs that much," continued Madam Sevrance, in a quieter tone. "I want to help her; and I want you to help her, if it is a possibility."

"I certainly shall, if only from selfish motives. I should be very sorry to see and hear any one else in her place. I think it is unfortunate that she should not have made herself more popular among the people."

"H'm. Yes. I'm afraid that is my fault. She — John Exton," with an emphatic burst, "that girl hasn't her equal in Boston; but in her reduced circumstances she shrinks from society, and I — I think I see now that I have encouraged her in it, when I ought to have urged her in the other direction. Keep her the place if you can, John, and we will turn over a new leaf." And the speaker's bright eyes searched the other's face sharply.

He raised his eyebrows, and made a gesture of doubt. "I tell you I should like to do so."

"You are satisfied with her?"

"Oh, I like her," said Exton, with a gently droll smile, as though he found satisfaction in repeating Aunt Ann's more ambiguous form of commendation.

"Then manage it somehow," said the madam curtly. "How do you get on here?" she added, rising, with a comprehensive survey of the little room.

"With the business? Very well, thank you."

"It is a heavy burden for you, I should think. But you always were an old head, John. I dare say your father knew you could be trusted. Ah, I shall never forget him. He befriended me when I needed it." And the impulsive woman dashed her hand across her eyes, and then held it out. "Good-bye. You are probably in as much haste as I am."

Exton bowed over the hand, and then opened the door.

Left alone again with his mental image of Kate, a strange satisfaction swelled within him. Few things in his successful life had given him the pleasure he felt in the knowledge that he alone could help that quietly self-sufficient young woman in the present crisis of her affairs.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE COMMITTEE DECIDE.

THE news was a heavy blow to Kate. Margery told her as gently as possible, her eyes filling with tears at the blank surprise that overspread her sister's face.

"Don't mind it, dearest Kate," she pleaded, throwing her arms around her. "I'm fit for something beside sitting at home and sewing. You know the girls used to call me the native, half the time at school, because people were always saying I spoke French like one. I will get up a class. I know I can; and you will soon get another position. I told Aunt Ann about it, and she said she had money in the bank and that we were not to worry. I assured her we did not need it, and that there were plenty of things we could do."

"Who told you this?" asked Kate, quietly.

"Mr. Ingalls. He heard people talking it over at the church, and he thought we should like to be forewarned."

"It was very kind of him," said Kate, earnestly, and fell to thinking again.

he next day was Sunday. Kate was in her place, calm, self-poised manner unchanged.

unt Ann and Margery were in the congregation. It might be one of the last Sundays that Kate would see in the beautiful church, and Aunt Ann must hear

The latter was in the most cheerful frame of mind. Next to impossible as it was for her to keep a secret, Margery's sadness several times brought her almost near to disclosing her ground for hopefulness; but instinct warned her that her nieces would not regard with favor her intercession of yesterday, and she managed to keep the account of her visit to Mr. Exton from slipping off her tongue's end.

He was there in his pew, and Aunt Ann's spectacles were often turned in his direction with an unconscious half smile of confidence. Her heart swelled with pride as Kate's rich voice rang clearly out.

"That's the old Eaton grit," she thought, with satisfaction. "She don't falter though she knows that half the congregation may be criticising and talking forward to the new woman. What they can do is better than that passes me! Why, it's worth the salary for people to get such a lovely critter to sing at every Sunday!" but here Aunt Ann reached herself for wordly thoughts, and reverentially closed her eyes with one hand, while resting her head on the other.

Margery sat beside her, and at the end of the pew sat Ray Ingalls, who had constituted himself their minister. He also held an immaculately gloved hand

over his eyes, but it was for the purpose of gaining more liberty to gaze at Margaret, who looked steadily and sadly at Kate's pure, noble face. Once he leaned toward her.

"I am afraid you are worshipping the wrong person," he whispered.

She smiled a little then, and tried to turn her attention to the pulpit.

Two days afterward, Kate went to Madam Sevrance for her lesson. She was a little late; and, the previous pupil having departed, the teacher was seated at the piano looking over a new song. Without rising, and still striking the chords, the latter spoke with her usual abruptness.

"Good morning, Kate. Have you heard that they are trying to supplant you at the 'Apostles'?"

"Yes." Kate nodded, and smiled forlornly. "They have a right to, unfortunately."

"Well," and Madam Sevrance stopped playing and turned toward her, "it is not concluded yet; but if it comes you had better make a greater point of your teaching."

"I should be very glad to do so; at present it really amounts to very little. I am out a great deal; but it is because my pupils are so separated, not because they are so numerous."

"Yes. We must change our tactics and see if we cannot make you more fashionable. I can throw more work into your hands, but have refrained because I thought you did enough. One afternoon in the week

you can have this room. Some of them can come to you."

"Dear Madam Sevrance, how kind you are!" exclaimed the girl.

"You will have an invitation to Mrs. Farrar's *Musical*, you and your sister," continued the other. "I suggest that you accept it."

"What shall I sing?"

"You will not be invited to sing. You will be like any other guest."

"Then I have no place there."

"Yes, you had better go."

"But you yourself have said so often —"

"Yes," interrupted Madam Sevrance, "I know it; but, as I say, it becomes necessary to change our tactics. It will be well for you to know serviceable people. Now for our lesson," and Kate, bewildered, not daring to ask another question, but with dozens surging to her lips, commenced the business of the hour.

Glad of something to cheer Margery, and to make her believe that she herself took a hopeful view of the future, Kate recounted to her sister the above conversation.

Margery listened to it all very seriously, not even the possibility of a party in the near future having power to elate her. Society meant to her largely the congregation of the Church of the Apostles, which, as a body, were in Margery's blackest books. Even Kate did not look forward to the impending disaster with quite the same apprehension which her junior felt.

She was upborne by the necessity for effort and action, while Margery, obliged to take a passive part, brooded over the added labor which the coming change would impose upon her sister. But they were not long kept in suspense. Before another Sunday came around, the blow fell. It came in the shape of a letter addressed to Kate, which Margery found beside her plate at the lunch table. It bore upon it the well-known stamp which, until now, had been so welcome, enclosing, as it always had done, the precious check which was to carry them through until another quarter came around. Now the familiar writing struck a chill to Margery's heart, and took away her appetite. Kate was out, and she must curb her impatience for some hours yet. She set the dreaded missive up in plain sight on her bureau, still gazing at it with fascinated eyes. The half hours dragged by with unprecedented slowness until her sister's return, and as soon as Kate came in and saw Margery's face she knew that something had happened.

"What is it, dear?" she asked, quickly.

"There is a letter for you from Mr. Briggs," indicating where it lay.

"Oh, has it come?" and Kate walked straight to it, without stopping to remove her hat. "Not quite so welcome as usual," she added with a brave smile.

Margery buried her face in her hands and burst into tears. For a minute Kate took no notice of her, but presently she exclaimed:

"Margery, stop crying. Listen to me."

Margery looked up, at the excited tone. Kate's cheeks were burning.

"This is what Mr. Briggs says:—

DEAR MISS STANDISH, — At a meeting of the committee yesterday, it was unanimously decided to offer to renew our present arrangement with you for the coming year. Be kind enough to apprise us of your decision at your earliest convenience. Very truly yours,

C. S. BRIGGS."

Margery jumped up and hugged Kate vehemently; then snatching the banjo from its corner, she struck up the wildest, most abandoned jig in her whole repertoire, tapping the rhythm out with her foot, and rolling her head about in true darky fashion.

Kate sat down and laughed. "Stop, you absurd girl," she cried.

But Margery only played the harder, occasionally shouting out incoherently, tapping her foot and waving her head with still greater abandon, until, with a sudden start, she let the banjo swing down at her side and laughed merrily. She had caught sight of Aunt Ann in the doorway, her hands uplifted, her mouth open, and her eyes staring.

"Law bless us!" ejaculated the new-comer. "I came in to cheer you up, but it seems now as though you need calming down more."

"Kate has the place another year. It's all right. Hurrah!" cried Margery, starting up and catching Aunt Ann around the waist, preparatory to starting across the room with her in a *galop*.

"Mercy — Oh, Margery — Oh, please," puffed Aunt Ann, tumbling after her determined partner. "I haven't any objection to dancing," she added.

"Oh, haven't you!" laughed her tormentor. "I thought you had. I could not get you to come along."

"Where it's conducted right, and folks know how," finished Aunt Ann equably.

"Why, I conducted you beautifully, but there is Kate waiting to be congratulated."

"My dear child, I just expected it would turn out that way," cried the other, turning to Kate and shaking both her hands warmly. Ah, Aunt Ann, beware; your secret is getting very slippery and hard to hold; but hold it, if you value the favor of your elder niece. "I was sure, I — precisely, I just knew it would be all right," she finished, smiling and stammering as she released Kate.

"Well, I was far from sure," replied the latter, taking off her outer garments.

"And we have an invitation to a party, a musical party, Aunt Ann," announced Margery, now able to enjoy that fact with zest, "and, more wonderful still, we are going. Such is the royal decree."

"And quite right," said Aunt Ann, cheerfully.

"The trouble," said Kate, "is clothes. I have my graduating dress. It will do very well, but —"

"Now, Kate, you are interfering in my province," interrupted her sister; "that dress won't do for you at all. It is pretty, but it is flimsy and cheap, and will be just the thing for me, made a yard or two shorter.

I find I must have been thinking out the dress problem with my cerebellum all the time this church affair has been hanging over us, for I find it is quite clearly settled in my mind. You are to have a new dress; we can afford it now, and it shall be fitted by the grandest *modiste* in Boston, and I will make it. We will all three go together to buy it," finished Margery, with a joyful flourish.

Kate's eyes shone with an equal pleasure. "You are very indulgent to me, Margery. I do not know about it."

"If one of you must have it, it seems sensible that you should be the one," remarked Aunt Ann. "I suppose it will be white muslin."

"Horrors!" exclaimed Margery, irreverently; but she immediately patted her aunt's hand to make up for the disrespect. "That will do for me, but Kate must be different. Besides, we cannot afford white, and it must be something that she can wear ever so many times without its being remarked," she finished, considering hopefully that if Kate consented to attend one party, it might lead to better things. "*C'est le premier pas qui coute.*"

"Margery will do the best that any one can do," said Kate, looking at her sister affectionately. "She has a genius for clothes. I only wish she had a broader scope in which to exercise it."

"And here is another letter for you, Kate," said Margery, starting up to get it. "I nearly forgot it in my excitement over Mr. Briggs."

Kate took it from her. "From Madam Sevrance," she remarked, breaking the seal and glancing over its contents. "Well, well," she added, presently, "this is very *à propos* just now. Madam Sevrance has written me a list of the names of the ladies likely to be at Mrs. Farrar's whom she wishes us to cultivate." Here she began reading aloud: "Mrs. Knox, very artistic in her tastes, paints well in water colors; Mrs. Ludlow, very deaf, but supersensitive; Mrs. Manning, has written a book of poems — her *nom de plume* Marion Day; Mrs. Brackett, —"

"Oh, Kate!" protested Margery.

"There is quite a long list of them," observed Kate.

"And does she expect us to remember? I can never learn those and make a dress too in such a little while," said Margery, aghast. "Was there ever such a woman! First she would not let us go anywhere, and now she decides we may go; but mustn't do it in peace."

Kate laughed. "Aunt Ann must come in and sit with you and hear you say your lesson," she said; "and now I will look over my accounts and decide how fine we may dare to make ourselves in order to charm these ladies into giving me their teachable daughters."

CHAPTER XV.

FRILLS AND FURBELOWS.

THERE were exciting scenes for the next few days in that back room in the boarding-house. Poor Kate decided she should never care to play the onerous part of great lady if all *modistes* were as autocratic and exacting as Margery. Aunt Ann entered into the *mêlée* with headlong enthusiasm. No wonder she was slightly distraught at dinner-time, and sometimes answered her gentlemen at random. One day in particular she had been spending half the afternoon in at the next house. The dress was nearly done. It was a long black silk, made more soft and youthful by draperies of black web lace which Margery had to-day been adjusting, while Aunt Ann stood by, with her hands full of pins, which she offered as fast as the deft fingers were ready for them. It had been a very particular undertaking, that draping, and Kate was tired out before the young dressmaker gave her permission to sit down. No wonder, that evening at dessert, that Aunt Ann asked Mr. Herring if he would not "eat another dish of pleats."

She blushed and laughed over her blunder, and apologized by saying that she had been helping her nieces to get ready to go to a party, and that the gentlemen must excuse her head being full of furbelows. Through all these days she had been silent at home upon this absorbing topic. Aunt Ann was learning a new sort of self-control. She realized that she could best please and serve the girls by being silent concerning them; and so, until now, only Kits had been the recipient of her enthusiastic confidences. Ray she could not always turn off. She willingly rejoiced with him over Kate's good fortune in retaining her choir position, but not a word had she said about the party until now. He seized quickly upon the admission.

"Where are they going? I thought they never went out," he said.

"Why shouldn't they go out?" asked Aunt Ann, with dignity.

"No reason at all. Every reason why they should. Where are they going?" he repeated.

"I forget the lady's name," replied Aunt Ann, unconscious how far she was exasperating her questioner.

"Think a minute. Try to think," he urged.

"Ray, I tell you I forget. I have an idea it is *that* Madam — Madam — don't you know who it is teaches Kate?"

"Madame Sevrance, perhaps," suggested Mr. Wiley, softly.

"That's it," said Aunt Ann, placidly.

Ray frowned, and plied his knife and fork savagely.

He had no invitation from Madam Sevrance. Mr. Sharp compassionately laid a hand on his forehead, which the other shook off with a muttered epithet. Ray considered himself very hardly used. He was meeting night after night, through the kindness of his much-sought uncle, bebies of charming ladies, who were all kind to him, as women are to a well-connected, handsome, frank boy; also many young girls, good talkers, capital dancers, in whose company he passed many gay hours; but the one thing he wanted happened to be Margery. None of these others had the charm, whatever it was, that distinguished her for him. Of course, the obstacles that prevented his meeting her added fuel to the flame of his admiration; and the entirely new experience of wanting something very much which nobody stepped forward to procure for him, wrought him into a state of fuming rebellion highly amusing to his uncle, who, by clever sounding, had in the last few days found out all there was to know of the relations between his nephew and the young girls who of late had been thrust upon his care and attention.

The night of Mrs. Farrar's *Musical* arrived, and found Margery ready for it. With modest pride she surveyed the two gala costumes lying on the bed. Aunt Ann came hurrying in as soon as she could decently leave her family, to see the girls dress, and, if it were permitted, even to help them. But it was not easy for any one else to render assistance in that line to Margery. Aunt Ann soon found herself stowed

away in a corner, while Margery, in *déshabillé* skilfully dressed her sister's soft, light hair, and put on her the *chef d'œuvre* which had caused many needle-pricks in her own little fingers.

"Well, Kate, you look as though you had melted and poured into it!" exclaimed Anne admiringly, scanning the graceful lines of her figure.

"No wonder," said Kate, laughing. "It is made on me. I feel like one of these doll-dresses won't come off."

"Isn't it comfortable?" asked Margery, anxiously.

"Yes, you good child, it is. Now let me rest, and dress yourself. You will not be ready."

"Yes, I shall. I can do it in five minutes."

"Then your hair will come down," said Kate, knowing how it acts."

"No, I have five packages of hairpins to spare," returned Margery, rejoicing in her sister's beauty, giving loving touches to the handsome lace which was their mother's, and which filled in the open black corsage.

"Now, if we had some flowers," she murmured ecstatically; and as she said it the flower-baskets were handed in at the door by Mrs. Standish's maid, who looked eagerly in at Miss Standish's wonted splendor. All three crowded around uttering exclamations of delight at the rich Jacqueminot roses, and the lavish and exquisite of English violets.

"Margery, have you Aladdin's lamp?" cried Kate.

Margery colored high with excitement and pleasure. She could not but be well assured of Ray Ingalls' admiration; and she had not a doubt that he was the giver of this second box, so far more gorgeous than the first.

"Who sent them?" asked Aunt Ann.

"There is no card; but it must have been Madam Sevrance," replied Kate. "What a whole-souled woman she is! She is evidently determined to leave no stone unturned to make us a success," and she registered a mental vow to exert herself to the utmost.

"No matter who sent them," said Margery, triumphantly, "I am going to put every one of the Jacks on you."

"Indeed you are not," said Kate, decidedly, "simply because you like them best. I prefer the violets. Go on, Margery dear, and dress yourself. You must hurry. Madam Sevrance will be here soon. What can I do to help you?"

"Nothing," replied the girl, carelessly, pulling down the masses of her hair.

Aunt Ann watched her in wonder, as she piled it up again with practised hands in her own pretty fashion, which was one no one else could copy. Then she put on the white muslin, whose effect caused the partial aunt to break forth into rapturous exclamations and a private wish that Ray might see her, just as she was, for one minute. How brilliant they both looked in the homely room. How commonplace their costumes

would become in Mrs. Farrar's parlors. But the girls themselves, with their bright eyes, creamy necks, and graceful figures, could never become commonplace in any crowd. Aunt Ann was perfectly right in admiring them with the tears in her eyes. She was thinking of their mother.

But the carriage was at the door. Aunt Ann went down stairs with them, and assisted them to enter, catching a vague glimpse of their chaperone as she did so; then the carriage drove off, and she watched it out of sight, carrying her dear girls away to their first glimpse of "society."

Kate's first words, after her greeting, were to thank Madam Sevrance for the flowers.

"They came at the moment we were wishing for them, and I never saw such beautiful ones," she said.

"I didn't send you any flowers," returned the other, abruptly, but with interest.

"You did not?" rejoined Kate, in great surprise. "Then, who in the world, — Oh," she added, for she suddenly thought of Ray.

Margery squeezed her hand in the darkness, and then Kate knew that her sister had divined the truth at once.

"Whom have you thought of?" asked Madam Sevrance.

"I — the only person it could be is a young gentleman who knows us, and who boards with our aunt; but I did not suppose he knew about to-night," replied Kate.

"I am afraid your aunt chatters," said Madam Sev-

rance, shortly. Poor Aunt Ann, when she had been so discreet !

In the dressing-room Madam Sevrance regarded her charges with high favor. Particularly on Kate her eyes rested with critical pleasure. "I have an easy task, this time," she thought, "if only I do not find a difficulty in undoing my own work."

It was pretty to see Margery's self-forgetfulness carried out in arranging Kate's flowers and buttoning her gloves. Madam Sevrance noticed it, and approved of the young girl more than she had ever done. She felt it very creditable, also, in Margery, to be so pretty and well dressed. She would never be, in any way, a drawback to Kate.

Those who knew Madam Sevrance best marvelled at the unusual affability of her manner this evening; and if they ascribed it to satisfaction in the charming girls she was chaperoning, they were not far wrong.

Ray Ingalls happened to see the trio enter the room. Madam Sevrance in black velvet, with diamonds in her ears; Kate, tall, and fair as a young princess; and Margery, a very snowdrop, — but no matter, we will not try to transcribe the similes which flashed into Ray's mind as he recognized Margery in her festive array. Suffice it to say that his face, changing from calm indifference to radiant delight, attracted the eye of his uncle, who immediately looked toward the entrance to find a reason for the transformation. As he recognized the new-comers, he smiled. "The boy is hard hit," he mused.

CHAPTER XVI.

MRS. FARRAR'S MUSICALS.

HE himself watched the new-comers for a time with approving eyes. At last, meeting a glance from Madam Sevrance which seemed to convey the idea that he was not performing the whole duty of a man, he came forward to accost her.

She had informed him of her intention to bring the girls to-night. He had even known that Kate was going to have a new dress, and that it was to be black.

The latter was still occupied in conversation with the hostess, but Madam Sevrance presented him to Margery, who stood by her side. He bowed to her in his sombre fashion, but the kindest light came into his eyes as she held out her hand and smiled.

"Mr. Exton and I are not quite strangers," she said, archly.

"So, you have not forgotten our little adventure," he returned as he shook her hand.

"Oh, you have had a little adventure," said Madam Sevrance, a trifle sharply.

"Yes," returned Exton. "Miss Margery may re-

ount it to you, if she likes. I should not have the courage."

Ray Ingalls, who had been holding himself in check while Madam Sevrance was introducing her charges to various friends, now presented his claims, looking rather severe and jealous,—the effect of Margery's cordial reception of Mr. Exton; but he found nothing to complain of. Margery was also cordial to him; indeed, very glad to see one familiar face among the crowd of strangers, a fact which she told him, as soon as he had been favored with a bow and scrutiny, both short, from Madam Sevrance.

"Let me find you a good place," he said, eagerly, offering her his arm; and she walked away with him.

Madam Sevrance and Exton followed the young couple with their eyes.

"I knew your sister's ideas very well," remarked the former. "Were she living she would probably prefer that her son should devote himself to some one else."

"Is it a case of devotion?"

"I only suspect it. The girls are sure the beautiful flowers they are wearing this evening came from him, although they do not know whom to thank."

Mr. Exton smiled serenely. "Flowers are always welcome," he replied.

Madam Sevrance felt irritated by his calmness. "I hope you will look after your nephew," she said, curtly; "my girls have no one to defend them."

"I wish all young ladies had as stanch protection.

So you want to make me your co-worker : you?" asked the other, lightly.

"Ah," she returned, warmly, "if you could be so powerful as you were in the church mat

"I must beg you again not to give me all t for that."

"I shall until you explain how it was done you tell me how much you did."

"I pulled a few wires; so did some of th Mine were more successful; that is all."

"John Exton, I've known you from a bc never before knew you so obstinate. It l picious, sir."

"Were not your orders, 'by fair means or he asked, the same quiet smile touching the c his lips. "Take my arm. My mother wish you, and the music will soon begin."

"Where is Kate?" asked the Madam, minedly, as she laid her hand within his arm.

"She is in the next room, talking to Mrs. B

"Well, you must be clairvoyant," obse other, with a laugh, "for your back has bee that way all the time."

Ray meanwhile, inwardly chuckling over astuteness, had escorted Margery to a seat in behind some plants, which had struck him liarily eligible when he passed through, some since.

"Is this a good place?" asked his companic fully.

"Capital. The acoustics of this house are very peculiar," returned her companion, soberly. "You will discover in a minute how perfectly we shall hear. There is so much more charm about music when one does not see the performer. Don't you think so?"

"Not when it is Kate," returned Margery, loyally.

"Oh, of course not when it is Kate," agreed Ray, promptly, seating himself beside her in the very cosy niche, and luxuriating in his good fortune. "But when she sings we can go out," he added, fervently hoping that Miss Standish's name came last on the programme.

"Oh, she does not sing to-night. We are not professional to-night," added Margery, half joking, half earnest. Many a past precept and warning had been flitting through her head this evening.

"*You*, are not professional at any time, are you?" asked Ray, amused.

"I am whatever Kate is," returned Margery, stoutly.

He laughed. "What is your profession?" he asked.

Margery colored. "You had better not laugh at me just when I am preparing a pretty speech about my flowers."

"They are gorgeous, against all that white," he replied, gazing admiringly at the red blossoms, all sweetness and vivid coloring, like Margery herself, he thought.

"Do not think to put me off the track by praising them," she said, shaking her head at him. "I knew immediately that you sent them. Kate and I were

both so pleased, and yet it was too kind. You must not do so any more."

A hot wave of vexation swept over the young fellow's face. "I did not send them," he said, reluctantly. "I did not even know you were going out this evening. Aunt Ann did not say when it was. I wish I had known. I wish they had been my gift."

Margery looked at him; at first sceptically, then an expression of utter mystification settled over her face.

"Then, who was it!" she exclaimed. "I cannot bear mysteries. It was not Madam Sevrance; it was not you — there is nobody else."

"It might have been Aunt Ann," suggested Ray, with a gleam of hope.

"No, indeed. She was there when they arrived, and was as much astonished as we were. You know she cannot act."

"I noticed your sister's violets. Were they with the roses?"

"Yes, certainly. Who *could* it have been?" and Margery looked into her companion's clouded face as though to wrest the secret from his innermost soul.

"Some unknown admirer, no doubt," he replied; and by the tinge of a sneer in his tone, the girl perceived not only that it was bitterness of spirit to him that any one else should send her flowers, but that he was really ignorant of the donor.

"Oh, thank you for suggesting that idea," she said,

with mischievous sweetness. "It is so pleasant to think that one may have unknown admirers. I am sure they must be the most interesting sort."

Ray frowned, but fortunately at this point some one in the next room began to sing, and during the song his countenance cleared.

Kate was in the parlor, seated beside one of the ladies whom she had been obediently cultivating. The singer happened to be the very person who had so narrowly escaped being Kate's successor at the Church of the Apostles. As she listened, an unusual color crept into her cheeks and rested there. She could not help wondering how many of the congregation were present and regretting that they were not to have Miss B—— in the choir. She felt uncomfortably conscious as she joined in the applause.

John Exton, stationed not far distant, read correctly her transparent face. In the buzz and movement that followed the music he attempted to approach her; but Mr. Wiley glided before him, and leaned over her chair. Exton watched her as she talked with him, turning to the lady beside her, as if to include her in the conversation. This lady leaned toward Madam Sevrance, who happened to be near, and laughingly referred to her some subject under discussion. Soon a bevy of heads were bent forward, and Kate was the centre of the vivacious group.

Exton watched the lights and shades of expression play over her face, and the curiosity and admiration in her companions' glances. He drew near the

charmed circle, and watched for his opportunity to claim her attention.

"We are accusing Miss Standish of being severely critical," murmured Mr. Wiley, addressing the newcomer. "She holds that a dramatic style in parlor singing is in poor taste."

"She is evidently too near the piano," returned Exton, meeting Kate's eyes. "If you will trust me, Miss Standish, I think I can find you a better place than this."

Kate's manner, which had been somewhat troubled and deprecatory, immediately became frigid.

When Margery related to her Ray Ingalls' story of the choir discussion, she unintentionally conveyed the idea to Kate that Ray knew his uncle to be in favor of dispensing with her services. Although Kate never referred to it, the knowledge had rankled. She was thoroughly ashamed of what she termed her narrowness, in denying to Mr. Exton his right to prefer some one else; and, while scolding herself for this, and striving to take an impartial, unemotional, business view of the matter, she found somewhere, very deep down in her — she called it vanity — a little hurt spot, the result of the knowledge that he was dissatisfied with her voice. For this she despised herself. She aspired to be broad-minded. More than that, she aspired to be indifferent to all opinions save that of her conscience, as befitted a working girl, with a living to get for herself and her sister.

It would be difficult to describe the mingled consid-

ions which moved her to rise immediately and
apt his offered arm. For one thing, she disliked
accidentally conspicuous position; and for another,
feared he might suspect her of a desire to avoid
1. Then Madam Sevrance had added, "Yes, child,
You are really too near."

"Mr. Wiley, I bequeath my chair to you," Kate
d, as she rose. "You have frightened me away,"
d, with a smiling bow to the others of the group,
e moved off. John Exton looked down at the
plets on her bosom, for their scent was wafted
ward him, then lifted his eyes to her flushed face.

"I do not wonder you did not care for Miss B——'s
nging," he observed. "She needs a larger place."

"Like a church," thought Kate. "I have not said
disliked it," she replied, quietly.

Against her will she enjoyed the fact of being with
er companion, and found in it the first exciting cir-
umstance of her evening. So far she had been work-
ing, really working, under Madam Sevrance's orders.
She had been attentively seeking to know and to
lease those whom the teacher had suggested; but
his walking, or rather of necessity sauntering, with
John Exton in the perfume and the light, transformed
her from the would-be shrewd woman of business into
a young girl at her first party, leaning upon the arm
of the only man she had ever admired. Kate did not
acknowledge this. She only vaguely felt herself in
danger, and in need of recalling every cynical precept
of her teacher.

She struggled against all pleasurable sensation. He knew hers and Margery's need, yet had not scrupled to try to deprive them of much of their support. Why should she admire him? Why should she be walking with him?

But she suddenly awoke to the fact that he was speaking. "I beg your pardon?" she asked.

"I was saying that you probably are not yet able to feel as much at home in Boston as in New York."

Kate shook her head with a smile. "I seem not to be the same person who lived in New York," she said.

"By that I suppose you mean that you dislike Boston?"

"Does not every one agree that childhood is the happiest part of life? I was a petted child in New York. I am a woman in Boston."

Her replies were not encouraging, but Mr. Exton seemed not to be disturbed by their curtness.

"Do you know many here to-night?" he asked.

"They are all strangers to me; but I have found them very cordial and kind, thanks to being Madam Sevrance's *protégée*."

"It is quite unfair to ascribe it to that. You —"

"Please tell me who that lady is," she said, suddenly, interrupting him. She would not receive his compliments. "The one in the corner, with the white hair. I was introduced to her, and we had quite a little conversation, but I did not catch the name. She has an interesting face, but a strange, irritable manner.

I should not imagine," and the girl smiled, "that she would be agreeable to live with."

"That is my mother," said Mr. Exton, simply.

"Oh!" exclaimed Kate, softly and in horror. "Do forgive me."

"Certainly," replied the other, without embarrassment.

"It hurts me to have said such a thing, not only because it was a silly and rude mistake, but because it must be such a blessing to have a mother to live with," she said, with a little unaffected break in her voice.

"My mother is not well, she is a great sufferer," he observed, explanatorily.

"Ah, I am so sorry," murmured Kate, feeling unutterably foolish and crushed, and only conscious of one wish,—to release Mr. Exton from attendance upon her.

"I think she wants you now," she suggested. "She seems to me to be trying to attract your attention. I can sit right here. It is at a pleasant distance."

Exton looked around. His mother signalled him with her fan, and, excusing himself, he obeyed the summons. Kate immediately rose, slipped through a neighboring door, and disappeared.

Proceeding through the adjoining apartment she found her way into an empty room, evidently a library, where a deep grate fire was burning. Without considering that it might be counted as a discourteous mark of indifference to the entertainment should she be seen here, she breathed a sigh of relief at finding

herself alone, and, sinking into a large morocco chair in a corner farthest from the fire, she gazed into its glowing depths and gave herself up to thoughts of the gloomiest tinge. She wished that Madam Sevrance had not relaxed her ideas. She wished heartily that she had not obeyed her. Her very dress was a luxury which it was daring to afford. Her enjoyment of a few minutes since was a luxury deadly to her peace of mind. She thought of her home in the boarding-house. "God has put us there," she thought. "That is one life, this is another. I cannot mingle the two. Poor Margery, how will this affect her?" and then she remembered that she did not know where Margery was. She had seen her as Ray was leading her out of the room, and she had no doubt that he would improve the shining hour to the utmost by remaining Margery's shadow all the evening.

"It is a rare chance for him, and he has been very kind," thought Kate, drooping her head over the delicious blossoms, which she believed she owed to him. "It will not happen again soon; perhaps it will never happen; certainly it will not, unless Madam Sevrance procures us invitations. Oh, I will beg her not to!"

As she determined upon this, a step approached the door of the library and stopped. The gas-jets were turned low in the room. Kate shrank back into her chair, hoping to escape detection. For the first time it flashed upon her how mortifying it would be to be discovered in a room which evidently was not intended to-night for guests. Music from piano and violin was

sounding in the distance. Kate held her very breath. The figure in the doorway wore the conventional dress suit; but without looking higher than the broad shoulders she recognized the man. Surely he would turn away. Her heart-beats were painful.

Mr. Exton came deliberately in. "This is very pleasant, Miss Standish," he said. "Did you intend to be a monopolist?"

"How did you know I was here?" she asked, breathlessly.

"I smelled violets. They are my favorite flowers."

He advanced and stood beside her. "I have been hunting for you everywhere."

She looked up at him in genuine surprise.

"And now I have the mortification of feeling that you are vexed at being found."

She had to steel herself against the kindness of his voice, even while she felt grateful to him for not resenting her blunder. She had given him good opportunity to avoid her, and, of his own will, he had chosen to search for her instead. His next words dashed her dawning complacency to the ground, and brought her to her sober, every-day senses.

"I have been commissioned to find you, and to beg that you will sing."

"Oh, — yes," she said, straightening up in her chair, and leaning on the arm farthest from him. "I suppose I ought to be grateful for the opportunity."

"Do not consent, if it is disagreeable," said Mr. Exton, hastily, supposing her to be sarcastic.

"I have no right to consider my wishes. If I am given an opportunity to sing, and show my method where it is likely to procure me teaching, I ought to be glad," she replied, with the explicitness which she hated, but deemed a healthful tonic.

"You are young to hold such strictly business ideas," observed her companion; and, although she did not look up, she suspected him of smiling.

"I am not so young as you think," she returned; having been instructed long ago, by her preceptress, to conceal the damaging fact of her youth whenever possible.

"Not yet twenty, I should say."

"I am twenty-one," she rejoined, hastily.

"Indeed, so old!" he said; and then she knew he was laughing at her.

"I ought not to have told you," she said. "Please do not betray me. It would be better for me," she added, half sadly, "money in my pocket, as Madam Sevrance would say, if I were thirty-one instead."

"Then you would be as old as I am. But I find myself having committed an awful solecism — ferreting out a lady's age. I must return to my errand. It is my mother, joining her request to Mrs. Farrar's, who wishes to hear you sing."

Kate colored brightly in the firelight. "Then I shall certainly sing," she said softly and quickly.

"Thank you. It will please her very much. Do you know, Miss Standish," he continued, hesitating a little, and speaking very kindly, "I fancied, when I

first discovered you in this lonely room, that you had perhaps come away here because you were vexed and annoyed. I wish to make peace between you and your own thoughts. Promise me you will not upbraid yourself about a trifle."

"It was no trifle," replied Kate, in a smothered voice but with emphasis. "It was something to do penance for all one's life. It was a mistake which proves that the perpetrator is unfit for society."

"Do not say that. Such mistakes are bound to happen, especially perhaps among those who have not yet learned the arts and suavities of social life."

"Or the charity that thinketh no evil," added Kate.

"At all events, they trouble the perpetrator more than the victim. Do you not suppose that I felt more hurt for you than for myself when you gave that adverse opinion?"

"Are you as generous as that?"

"Would not any person of commonest good feeling experience the same sensation. Would *you* not?"

"Even I?" said Kate, with an unhappy little laugh.

"Come, we are making too much of this," continued her companion. "If you really must do penance in order to be satisfied, come and sing for my mother. They would like the song to follow the next number."

He was very kind. Kate felt it; but under all burned that little secret hurt. *He* did not care to hear her sing. Her one accomplishment had not power to please him. She stifled the half-formed thought resolutely, and rose to take his arm. As she

did so, two or three violets fell from her dress. He stooped and picked them up, carrying them in his hand as they went.

Passing into the hall instead of going back through the parlors, they spied Margery and Ray in their nook behind the plants. The piano and violin had ceased, and these two were chattering like a pair of young magpies whose tongues had long been restrained.

"They look very comfortable," said Mr. Exton.

"Yes, too comfortable," said Kate, uneasily, turning in their direction.

"Are you going to disturb them?"

"I think I must."

Ray saw the movement and cast a quick frown at his uncle and an apprehensive glance at Kate. The invaders came straight on, around the flower pots, and stood beside them.

"Are you having a nice time, Kate?" asked Margery, airily.

"Yes, but why are you not out, dear, making yourself agreeable?" asked Kate, significantly.

"Oh, she has been making herself agreeable, Miss Standish," said Ray, earnestly.

"I just had not the courage, Kate," replied the girl, pouting. "Mr. Exton," appealing to her sister's grave escort, "do you think it would be polite for me to go out and talk to people between the numbers?"

"It is the custom, yes. If you like, you know," he added.

"Well, I do not like. Madame Sevrance, knowing we were strangers, made out for us the most absurd list of people with their peculiarities. One was deaf, and one had written a book, and another painted."

"Lots of them do that," interpolated Ray.

"Margery!" warned Kate, smiling nevertheless at her sister's unaffected repugnance.

"Well, all is I have had too much else to think of to get them straight. I should make blunders if I tried to remember. I should be certain to praise the artist's book, and shout at the authoress, and murmur confidences to the deaf lady."

They all laughed. "Then I think you had better stay here where you are out of mischief, Miss Margery," said Mr. Exton, drawing upon himself glances of approval and blessing from his nephew.

"*Is* she out of mischief?" thought Kate, breathing a sigh, and looking at her sister's happy face. Margery was evidently in her element. Well dressed, daintily gloved, leaning back among the tall plants with her companion's happy eyes upon her, and his light-hearted talk in her ears, she did not care how many hours slipped by.

"Ah, Kate!", she exclaimed, looking up. "I must tell you. Mr. Ingalls did not send us our flowers."

"Is it possible?" returned Kate, startled. "Our flowers," she continued, addressing Mr. Exton in explanation, "rained down upon us to-night, like the gift of a good fairy. We are at a loss whom to thank."

He smiled in polite acquiescence. "Flowers should always be anonymous, as they come to us first," he said, and inhaled the fragrance of the violets in his hand.

"But I ought to take advantage of this lull to let Mrs. Farrar know that I will sing," said Kate, suddenly bethinking herself.

"May I leave you here a minute and carry the message?" asked Exton.

"If you please; and see if Madam Sevrance will come out and speak with me. She will play my accompaniment."

Mr. Exton immediately turned away, and Ray promptly rose and offered his place to Kate, who accepted it with alacrity. It was on the farther side of Margery, and offered no facilities to any one who might wish to stand beside her and converse.

All too soon for at least two of the company the evening came to a close. After Kate's song, Mr. Exton had come to Ray and reminded him that they were due at a reception, and had tarried at Mrs. Farrar's long enough.

"I am not going, Uncle John, if you do not care," Ray had replied. "So long as we are having a good time here, what is the use?"

Uncle John had raised his eyebrows and turned away, leaving his nephew in doubt as to his own intentions; but at the end of the evening, when Ray escorted Margery to the carriage, he found Mr. Exton assisting Kate in.

Some remarks of Madam Sevrance on the homeward way are worth recording.

"Well, Kate, you seem to have made a conquest of Mrs. Exton," she said. "I saw her petting you after your song. Indeed she told me before you sang that it was a pity you should be a teacher; your voice was so soothing she thought you would read aloud well, and would be an invaluable companion for some one like herself." The carriage was too dark to reveal the sharp flash in the speaker's black eyes, or the color that swept over Kate's face. "She is a strange old woman," proceeded Madam Sevrance. "It is her mania that every unmarried woman under ninety wants to marry John. She has some ground for it, to be sure, and still it sometimes makes her ridiculous. She is barely civil to all possible aspirants."

Another silence, during which Kate's cheeks tingled.

"Does she suspect you, Madam Sevrance?" suggested Margery, lightly.

"*Me?*" with the greatest surprise. "No; and would not if I were twenty and beautiful. I should still be—not above suspicion, but below it. Am I not a woman who goes into the city every day to earn her bread and butter?"

"And velvet and diamonds," added Margery, *sotto voce*. But the Madam's sharp ears caught the words.

"So much the more fortunate business woman I; but not the more eligible."

Kate wondered hotly if these remarks could be aimed

at her. They were so much in her teacher's usual strain that she could not be sure.

When "good nights" were exchanged, and the girls were once more in their room, Margery took off her wrappings and revealed a fresh, happy face, very different from Kate's tired one.

"Oh, you glorious Kate!" she said, heartily, "how proud I was of you to-night when you sang! I came out to the door and watched people to see how they took it, and I was satisfied. I distinctly heard one lady say, 'She is a beautiful creature.'"

Kate laughed wearily, and threw her shawl over a chair. "What a compliment to my voice!"

"Oh, but you were!" exclaimed her fond sister. "Your dress is a success, and you were so calm, and graceful, and sweet, and your singing was—well, I do not blame your unknown admirer in the least. Why," after waiting an instant in an expectant attitude, "why do you not ask me what I mean? I can a wondrous tale unfold."

"Unfold it by all means."

Kate's tone was not urgent, but Margery was nothing daunted. She came and leaned her hands on the bureau before which Kate was taking off her finery.

"Ray Ingalls has found out what they did in the music committee meeting."

"Don't we know that already?"

"*Did* you know that one of the committee arose and stated that a certain influential member of the society was particularly desirous of retaining Miss Standish

in the choir? That this gentleman, learning that Miss B—— would require a salary one hundred dollars less than Miss Standish, was prepared to make up the deficit out of his own pocket rather than lose Miss Standish? There!" cried Margery, triumphantly, "that is appreciation! You have captivated some delightful, rich old foggy, Kate, and I congratulate you."

Kate regarded her beaming face with annoyed surprise.

"Is that true? I do not like it at all."

"That is unfortunate; for it is true, perfectly."

"Does Mr. Ingalls know who this benefactor is?"

"He hasn't the least idea."

"Then *we* surely cannot find out," replied Kate; "and there is comfort in that."

Margery leaned her excited, happy face against her sister's shoulder so that both were reflected in the mirror. She was silent for an instant, then she burst forth:

"What an aggravating woman Madam Sevrance is! How she loves to fling about her unpleasant ideas!"

"Tonics, call them," said Kate.

"Fiddle-de-dee, healthy people do not need quinine. The idea of her talking that way about Mr. Exton, the gentle, dignified, lovely man! Oh, I had a good time expressing my opinion of him to Mr. Ingalls. How cross it made him!" and Margery laughed in gleeful retrospection. "Men are terribly vain. They dislike to hear one another praised more than women do, I am

sure. Well, Mr. Exton *does* make his nephew seem green."

"You did not tell Mr. Ingalls that!"

"No, not exactly; but I am sure I implied it. I felt honest, and I talked honestly, and let my enthusiasm have full play."

"Margery, supposing he should repeat your nonsense to his uncle!"

"No danger of that—I mean no hope. If he only would, it, might set Mr. Exton thinking. He would say to himself, 'There is that lovely young girl in Berkshire Street pining for me.'"

"He would be more likely to say, 'There is that silly, gushing school-girl—'"

"Hush!" interrupted Margery. "It would flatter him tremendously. What good fun it would be to astonish Madam Sevrance by—"

"Don't!" said Kate, quickly. "Joke on some other subject, please. It hurts my self-love to hear you talk about Mr. Exton. Think how totally uninteresting either of us would be to a man who has travelled and seen and done so much. I felt out of place to-night, Margery," facing her sister, suddenly, "and as though I would never repeat the experiment if I could help it. I fear you do not agree with me."

"Indeed, no; I felt as though I had slipped into place at last, and as though I would like to repeat the experiment six times a week. Kate, dear, why will you find a red-hot handle to everything, and insist upon taking hold of it? I suppose you are deep and I know

I am shallow, but surely we both ought to be happy to-night—fresh from so many compliments and kind words. Some friend cared enough for our pleasure to send us these flowers. Some other body is willing to pay a hundred dollars a year extra to hear you sing on Sunday. There are two friends, and Aunt Ann and Kits are two more, and we have each other. Let me put your violets with the roses. We must make them last as long as we can. May the great unknown feel it in all his bones when we are going to another party!”

“Ah,” said Kate, looking affectionately at her busy sister, “you are healthy, Margery. I do not believe you need any quinine!”

CHAPTER XVII.

CROSS-QUESTIONINGS.

KATE's first attempts toward gaining social popularity met with success. There was no doubt that she carried off the honors of Mrs. Farrar's evening, musically, and her conscientious efforts to ingratiate herself with the possible patrons there assembled were not without effect. To Mrs. Exton, especially, she showed a most natural and sweet deference after that unfortunate and unkind criticism of her; and the fancy of the capricious old lady was delightfully touched by the girl's striking beauty, winning manner, and fresh voice.

She accosted her son on the subject the moment their carriage had turned toward home.

Settling back into her corner, and resting her head against the cushions, she spoke in the weary, nasal tone into which tired women fall.

"I wonder where Madam Sevrance found her, John? She is as graceful and at ease as any girl I know."

"What is there surprising in that, mother?" Mr. Exton spoke abruptly.

"It is a pity I am so seldom able to go to church," continued the other, "and yet it was she, was it not, whom the committee thought of sending away? I am very glad they decided not to do it. I shall save myself on purpose to go next Sunday. She told me that they were to have some extra music. Where," averting to her first question, "did Madam Sevrance send her?"

"She found Madam Sevrance, I believe."

"Oh, indeed; a Boston family?"

Mr. Exton smiled at the eagerness of the question. Probably,—once. You could not, as a free-born American, ask for an older name. No; Miss Standish's father was a New Yorker, I believe."

Mrs. Exton relapsed into her corner. "Why didn't he stay in New York, then? I suppose there are plenty of music teachers there. Was her father present to-night?"

"I cannot be sure. Mr. Standish departed this life some time since."

"You seem to know a great deal about them," said the other, with a touch of resentment.

"It happens fortunately for you, does it not?" asked the son, quietly.

"Perhaps you can tell me what this departed father was."

"When he died?"

"Well — yes."

"A ruined speculator. He died here in Boston."

"Ah, then, perhaps his daughter simply remained

here because she hadn't money enough to return to New York. But, then, how could she afford to take lessons of Madam Sevrance? Her prices are exorbitant."

Mr. Exton smiled into the gloom. "That is between themselves; but I imagine Miss Standish pays that debt in some other coin than that we are accustomed to. Madam Sevrance is very fond of her," he added.

"And well she may be. I dare say she dresses her," said Mrs. Exton. "She was well dressed; in fact, she appeared in every way quite as well as any girl I know."

"And again I ask, why should that surprise you?"

"You know that is a very foolish question."

"Indeed I do not. I really wish you would enlighten me."

"I am surprised at you, John. A woman so young as Miss Standish, who teaches to support herself! What time has she had for self-cultivation? I am not taking into consideration now her antecedents; but you say her father was nobody, and her mother — how about her mother?"

"Her mother was a farmer's daughter; sister of Ray's housekeeper."

"No!" exclaimed Mrs. Exton, in excessive surprise. "Sister of that person!"

"Miss Eaton is an excellent cook," suggested the other, tranquilly.

"And you think that it is not surprising that the niece of an excellent cook, a mere drudge, should look

and move and speak as that young creature did to-night?" asked Mrs. Exton, between triumph and amazement.

After a moment of vain waiting for a reply, she continued: "By the way, my son, I do not like Ray's calling that woman aunt."

"Miss Standish calls her so."

"That is a different matter!" was the haughty reply. "Why should you compare Ray to Miss Standish? I wish you would give Ray to understand that it is not fitting for him to address that woman — what is her name?"

"Eaton."

"Well, Miss Eaton, so familiarly."

"I see no harm in it, mother, and would rather not interfere in such a trifling matter."

"You are very odd in some things, John. You haven't quite all the perceptions that I should expect"; but while uttering this criticism, Mrs. Exton turned her languid eyes upon her son with an adoring expression. "I will see Ray and have a talk with him myself. Where did he disappear to to-night? He ought to have stayed longer. It was hardly respectful to Mrs. Farrar."

"He was there to the very end," and Mr. Exton smiled. "He remained pretty much in one spot, however, in a remote corner with a charming companion."

Mrs. Exton laughed indulgently. "Who was the companion? Abby Waite? She is a pretty little thing."

"No, she was another pretty little thing. Miss Margery Standish."

The old lady frowned as suddenly as she had laughed.

"Is there another of them?"

"Miss Standish has a sister, yes."

"How could you allow it, John?—I mean allow Ray to behave so."

"I suppose it would have been quite a different thing if he had chosen to behave so with Miss Waite."

"Why of course it would. John," with sudden perception, "he becomes acquainted with these girls through their aunt."

"I suspect he does," remarked the son, coolly.

"Why, this is distressing!" exclaimed Mrs. Exton, sitting up straight and looking down a long vista of possible calamity. "Those people are always designing, always in a hurry to get their girls married, and Ray is so young, he is just the victim for them."

"Mother, try not to be so unreasonable." John spoke sternly at last. "You felt unable to let Ray come to us, you feared he would disturb your health and comfort in various ways. The next best thing has been done. Miss Eaton is an excellent woman, and we are most fortunate to have secured her. She is one of the simplest creatures in the world, and seems really fond of Ray."

Here Mrs. Exton groaned.

"Far from endeavoring to attract the young man,

these young ladies have avoided him as far as they could. He told me so himself."

"Is it possible?" replied Mrs. Exton, hopefully. "Then my intuition was more correct than my fear. Miss Standish must be just what she appears. She is exactly the sort of person one would like to have about one constantly; reposeful and harmonious."

"Provided, of course that she kept her place," suggested the son, darkly.

"Oh, of course," assented the other, unsuspiciously. "It is because I am certain she has tact and would never annoy me, that I am thinking of her."

Mr. Exton laughed outright. "Do you suppose you can buy Miss Standish with as little trouble as you had last week in purchasing that villainous pug?"

Mrs. Exton drew herself up with offended dignity. "I think she is not the sensible girl I take her for if she will not gladly exchange her boarding-house and monotonous round of teaching for such a home as I shall give her. She could go on singing in church just the same. I could make her very useful," added the old lady, musingly.

"You are on quite the wrong track, mother," said the young man, struggling with his irritation. "If you wish for a young lady companion, we can easily find one for you; but not Miss Standish. Pray, put that out of your mind at once, else you will be greatly disappointed. It is strange you can consider asking a young lady to abandon her profession in order to read and sing to an invalid."

"Why should I not offer a young girl an easy life in place of a hard one if I take a fancy to her?" asked his mother, shortly. "This is not the sort of matter for you to interfere in, my son. I thought you were going to Mrs. Hereford's to-night," she added, with a determination to change the subject.

"I did intend to do so, but I found Ray disinclined, so I rather lazily followed his example."

"I think I must see Ray," observed Mrs. Exton, thoughtfully. "He seems a child to me still. I fear I have not realized sufficiently the necessity of supervising him."

That she should have the least difficulty in directing her grandson's tastes and movements, hardly occurred to the imperious old lady. John had never thwarted her. He had grown up, passed through college, and travelled, like many another fortunately born young man, without indulging in any eccentricities which could annoy her, and, at his father's death, had taken his honored place in the business world with a quiet capability which won many encomiums from his mother's friends, and only confirmed her opinion that in all the world no one had ever, or would ever rival her beloved and only son in all that goes to make manhood admirable.

With the memory of the deference John had always paid to her wishes, Mrs. Exton then scolded herself gently for a lamentable lack of attention to her orphan grandson, and the very next day sent for Ray to come and dine with her.

She examined him critically as he came into the room, and greeted her, his face alight with the superabundant health and spirit of youth.

"Does not your conscience reproach you, Ray?" she asked, receiving his kiss with unusual cordiality, and leaning back in the luxurious chair in which she was always to be found when outside of her own chamber. "It seems to me you have neglected me of late. Sit down here and let me lecture you."

"Why I am delighted to hear you say so," returned the young fellow, taking the seat she indicated, "for that means that you have been well enough to want to see me. You know I am always at your orders, and only do not wish to make myself a nuisance."

"Ah, Ray, had I only been well enough to have you live here, under my roof," sighed the old lady. "That is what Irene would have wished."

"My mother would not have wished you to be uncomfortable."

"It is not I who would have been made uncomfortable by that arrangement, but you," remarked Mrs. Exton, shaking her white head languidly. "You could not have had patience to maintain such quiet as I must have. It is so long since I have been able to entertain at all, and there are so many days when the least noise distracts me, it would be but a sad home for a boy like you, and yet—" she hesitated, and Ray spoke earnestly.

"Do not distress yourself in the least, grandmother. I am quite happy. Ask Uncle John," casting a glance

at Mr. Exton, who sat near, apparently absorbed in his paper, "if I am not well situated; or, better yet, some evening when you are able, come and see me. Aunt Ann would be delighted."

Mrs. Exton turned her eyes until they met his coldly. "Who?" she asked; "who would be delighted?"

"Why, Aunt Ann; Miss Eaton," he responded, unsuspiciously.

"I was not aware that we had the honor of Miss Eaton's relationship."

Ray looked up, a surprised glance in his brown eyes.

"No, of course not; but every one in Cedarville calls her aunt, and I formed the habit while there."

Mrs. Exton accepted the explanation as though she had needed it.

"Ah!" she said, with a short nod; "but now that you are not in Rome you need not do as the Romans do."

"Oh, it would quite hurt her now for me to call her Miss Eaton," returned Ray, hastily. "She is very fond of me," he continued, with fatuous complacency; "she seems to consider me as one of her own."

"Absurd!" exclaimed the old lady, intolerantly. "I do not like it and I will not have it. She is your housekeeper and nothing more, Ray. Pray, do not encourage a familiarity which was well enough when you were a child, but which is now decidedly out of place. You can never be sure with such people when they will cause you mortification. It is better to pre-

ant the possibility by keeping them at all times at a proper distance."

Ray's face was very red. "Such people!" he burst out. "What sort of a person do you suppose she is? You saw her nieces last night."

Mr. Exton must have turned his attention from heavy editorials to the newspaper wit; for he here smiled broadly into the open sheet.

"No, I saw but one of them. She is a beautiful girl. It really grieved me to think she had not been born into, and fitted to fill, a higher station. She has every natural advantage."

"She is fitted to fill any station," blurted out Ray, angrily nettled. "So is her sister."

"My dear," observed his grandmother, compassionately, "you are very young."

"I suppose I am," cried Ray, rising in a passion; but young as I am, I —"

He was about boldly declaring then and there his love for Margery Standish, and his determination not to listen to a word in disfavor of her or any of her belongings; but at the critical moment he met the steady gaze of a pair of deep gray eyes above the lowered newspaper, and for a second he paused.

"Mother, it naturally annoys Ray to have you set his judgment at naught. He knows these young ladies and you do not."

"At least he knows them better than I do," assented Mrs. Exton, apparently unconscious of having aroused any deep feeling, and immediately reverting to the

idea of her own benefit, with the selfishness of her invalided condition. She turned again to her grandson, who was manfully mastering his agitation.

"I have taken a great fancy to Miss Standish," she said. "In fact, I am anxious to engage her for a companion. I have never seen any one before whom I wished about me in that capacity. How do you think she would like the idea?"

"I don't think she would like it," returned Ray, with what composure he could muster, "and you certainly would not."

"Well, that is just what I want you to tell me," said Mrs. Exton, raising herself and leaning on an arm of her chair. "What is the reason I should not like it?"

"For many reasons. For instance," said Ray recklessly, "supposing Uncle John were to fall in love with her."

"A very absurd suggestion," said Mrs. Exton, sharply. "Have you any sensible objection to offer? Have I," becoming suddenly ironical, "touched a sore subject in discussing this young girl? Are you judging your uncle by yourself? Is it possible that you fancy yourself impressed by Miss Kate Standish, or are you only making a general defence of all belonging to Miss Eaton?"

"This will do, I think, mother," observed her son, in the decided tone he rarely used at home. "Ray has no deeper regard for Miss Standish than I have. It is distasteful to discuss her in this way. I hope you

not think seriously of your new fancy; but if you, your best way will be to call on the young lady, and then decide it between yourselves. As for Miss Weston, I think you are forgetting how highly Irene regarded her. In fact, it has occurred to me several times since she came to Boston that her home in the country may prove the very place for you to go next summer — a place where you can be undisturbed, and have a quiet change.”

“Oh, John, I hardly think,” returned his mother, additatively, — “still, it may be possible. Come, my,” she continued, an amused smile breaking over her face, “smooth that ruffled brow. I see that I have unwittingly underrated this remarkable family; but I shall have a headache if we discuss them further. Let us adjourn to the dining-room.”

CHAPTER XVIII.

KATE ACCEPTS ADVICE.

AUNT ANN awoke that morning in a very pardonable flutter of curiosity to hear how the "party" passed off.

Ray's enthusiastic assurance that the evening had been the pleasantest he had spent in Boston did not tend to allay her happy excitement; and at an early hour she presented herself in her nieces' apartment. She found Kate putting the finishing touches to her toilet, and Margery still in bed, rubbing her pretty, sleepy eyes, and quite ready to wake up and give her aunt a detailed account of decorations and dresses, and the compliments she and Kate had received.

Under her ingenious handling the Misses Standish became very important features of Mrs. Farrar's entertainment, insomuch that Kate was fain to laugh heartily, if a little scornfully, at the burst of delighted "*Well, wells!*" and "*Do says!*" that escaped from Margery's enraptured listener.

"I am not a mite surprised, not one mite!" exclaimed Aunt Ann at last, smoothing her apron and smiling.

"I am a little," remarked Kate, pinning her collar before the glass. "I fail quite to recognize ourselves."

"Fie, Kate! Dont spoil a good story," said Margery, good-naturedly. "It is every bit true, Aunt Ann. Kate never will see herself as others see her."

"Just so," responded Aunt Ann, surveying her elder niece with pride. "Now, Kate, I am sure you must see how mistaken your finicky notions are, and what a good thing it is for you and Margery to go out little and shine as you were meant to do. I heard a word or two of it from Ray; but he was very late to breakfast and just swallowed a cup of coffee and ran. I told him I was sure he needn't hurry; Uncle John would most likely be late himself."

"Do not speak that name thus lightly," said Margery with a portentous sigh, pressing her hands upon her heart.

Kate flashed one glance at her, and then turned to their visitor, who added, coaxingly, "Ain't you glad you went now, dear?"

"If it proves the means of getting me new pupils, yes, Aunt Ann."

"And that's all you care for," exclaimed the latter in amazement. "Well, now, a body would think you would have enjoyed so much music, and gay people allowing you round, and Mr. Exton a-dancing attendance on you and all."

Kate groaned. "Fancy Mr. Exton 'dancing attendance' on anybody," she thought.

"When I am a woman of leisure, Aunt Ann," she returned, "I will try my best to shine for brilliancy's sake. Now it must be in the interests of business."

"You don't want to try to be brilliant," said Aunt Ann, simply, "you only want to try to make people have a good time. I take it you don't need to think much about yourself till afterward. If folks are trying to make others happy they'll shine fast enough, and girls like you and Margery don't need to throw away the pleasures that offer as you go along through life. I mistrust, Kate my dear, that you are very proud," she added, dubiously, looking at the girl over the top of her spectacles.

Kate flushed high.

"Proud as a queen, proud as an empress," pronounced Margery, emphatically.

"Well, there's a good way and a bad way of being proud," remarked Aunt Ann, throwing out the suggestion in her simple matter-of-fact fashion. "Have you girls had any breakfast?"

"No, indeed," cried Margery, springing up nimbly. "Meals in the room extra, and Kate and I do not have any extras. But I can live on the memory of Mrs. Farrar's supper a good while yet."

"You will both go right in with me and get a good cup of coffee, the minute you are ready," said Aunt Ann.

Kate, who had been removing the laces from her festal garment, here put an arm around the speaker and gazed into her eyes.

"Have you been scolding me, Aunt Ann?" she asked, with an assumed frown.

"I don't know, my dear," was the smiling answer. "If you deserve it I have."

Aunt Ann heard a good deal about Mrs. Farrar's party, first and last. Ray conversed glibly upon the topic on every disengaged evening for a week afterward, his grandmother's conversation having had only the effect of making him more ardent. He met his neighbors at no other festivity, and so the *musical* remained the pre-eminent occasion for him. Aunt Ann could not long remain in doubt of the reality of the sentiment with which Margery had inspired the young man, and although she feigned ignorance of his intentions, she dwelt much upon the subject in secret, and silently gave Ray her full approbation and best wishes.

Aunt Ann had had her own love affair of course. No one looking at her could doubt that. She had had what is called a disappointment. The lover of her youth had deserted her for a widow with a good income, and although he was succeeded by other aspirants, the sweet-looking and capable girl had but a steadily negative answer for these. She believed that

"After loves of maids and men
Are but dainties dressed again."

She could not love twice, and her father needed her. Aunt Ann, with all her simplicity and credulity, had a lively fear of seeing her experience repeated in the

life of either of her nieces, and carefully refrained from taking the responsibility of lifting so much as a finger toward bringing the young people together.

"Perhaps after all Ray's feeling isn't the deep and lasting kind," she said to herself; "and on the other hand, perhaps Margery don't care for him, and never will."

One Sunday Kate had come out into the street after church and was walking briskly toward home, enjoying the bright, frosty air, when she heard hurried steps behind her on the stone walk. She had no doubt that Ray Ingalls was following her. He had begun the habit of escorting her home on Sunday and she was very cordial to him on those occasions in consideration of the obedience he had shown in abstaining from attentions which he was manifestly suffering to pay to her sister.

There was a smile on her face as the pursuer came beside her. She looked up, but it was John Exton who lifted his hat as he met her glance.

The color flashed into her face as she greeted him. "I thought you were Mr. Ingalls," she said. "We sometimes take the walk home together."

"It is a pleasant day to walk, and, as I wished to see you, I took the liberty of supplanting Ray, and of sending him home with my mother. You know discipline is good for youth."

Kate smiled. "That was certainly very mild discipline," she answered, trying not to be so glad to hear that quiet voice again.

"You are a good walker, Miss Standish, if you do this every Sunday."

"Yes, I am a good walker, and a spur to my abilities is a very cordial and very improper dislike of street-cars. As my teaching takes me in various directions, I have plenty of practice."

"There you have an immense advantage over young ladies who have only shopping and calling to break in upon their sedentary habits."

"I am afraid I should enjoy relinquishing that advantage."

"You mean you do not like teaching?"

Kate bit her lip. "I spoke too hastily, as I seem fated to do with you, Mr. Exton. I believe I ought to ask you to avoid me," she continued, with a short laugh. "You seem to rouse my antagonism."

"An antagonism to me? If so, I must rouse it in order to overcome it."

"No, not to you; to things," returned Kate, vaguely. "I would not for worlds have had Margery hear my silly speech. I think really when I am in my right mind I am perfectly contented."

"Well, it is decidedly unkind of you to imply that you are only out of your right mind when you are with me."

Kate colored. "I proved it, I am sure, once upon a time."

"Have you not forgiven yourself yet? I was afraid so. That is why I wished to see you to-day."

"Then, although you have forgiven, you have not forgotten," said the girl, quickly.

"I haven't the faculty of forgetting. My mother, Miss Standish, quite unsuspecting of your strictures upon her, is meditating making a request of you."

"What is it? I will do anything for her," replied Kate, quickly.

"That is what I was afraid of," observed Exton, deliberately. "I thought I had discovered a touch of the noble Quixote about you, and I was not sure how far it might lead you."

"Really!" exclaimed Kate, "I am not mad all the time, I assure you, Mr. Exton. I am certain you are not a clever judge of character—"

"Then you will promise not to assent to my mother's wishes, simply because she will coax you, and you have maligned her?"

"I will not say that. On the contrary, I cannot conceive of Mrs. Exton's making a request that I should not comply with."

"Very likely; but her request is going to surprise you. I still hope to divert her from making it; but my mother has suffered, Miss Standish; she has been greatly deferred to, and, in short, is accustomed to having her own way. I fear she will insist this time, and I hope you will not—I don't know how to say it. What I mean is, to beg you to treat her exactly as though you had never thought or spoken slightly of her. Will you?"

"I never like to make promises."

"Do you mean that you never make them?"

"Of course a young lady does only what she likes to do," replied the girl, smiling.

"Is that why you refused an invitation to Mrs. Langdon's Friday evening? Has a small, informal dance no charms for you?"

"Oh, how did you find that out?" said Kate, guiltily. "Through Madam Sevrance, of course," she added, answering her own question. "I hope my sister will not hear of it. I confess I did not tell her of the invitation."

"May I ask why?"

"She would have been so anxious to go."

"You mystify me. I should suppose that to be the very reason for telling her."

"I do not know that I can explain to you, Mr. Exton," said Kate, seriously; "but it is not best for us to go into society. It is not pleasant to take all and give nothing, for one thing; and then there are myriad other reasons," she finished, abruptly.

"Would you mind giving a few? I am curious to see if they are all as feeble as the first."

"Why is the first feeble?"

"You might accuse me unjustly of flattery if I endeavored to convince you."

"Thank you for your good opinion of us. Then we will not discuss that. If you care to hear another reason, this is one,—it will be difficult for you to appreciate the force of it, perhaps, but it is a weighty one,—people who have time and money to move in

society have similar interests and ways. There are ten thousand little customs by which they recognize one another, and — ”

“ And sometimes become fatally tired of one another before the season is over,” interrupted her amused listener.

“ Perhaps. You are smiling, Mr. Exton ; but it is a serious matter to a novice to try to appear at ease in your world.”

“ Please do not impute it to me. I have no ambition Atlasward.”

“ I have felt my awkwardness, on a few occasions, and Madam, — and others have warned me of the folly of attempting to serve two masters.”

“ Oh, it comes to that, does it ? ”

“ Exactly.” Kate breathed with a quickness not induced by her brisk exercise. “ A professional woman needs to save her strength for her work. Mrs. Langdon is a pupil of Madam Sevrance ; and when she came so kindly to call on me, and invite me to her house, I knew Madam Sevrance was concerned in it, directly or indirectly ; and I knew there would be no *use* in our accepting.”

“ No pupils to be obtained at a dance, I suppose ? ” suggested her companion, as she hesitated. His comments, whenever he touched upon this subject, although savoring of ridicule, were too gentle to convey any offence. “ By the way, how is the profession coming on ? ”

“ Very well, indeed, thank you. Madam Sevrance

has most kindly given me the use of her room one half day each week; so, you see, I enjoy brief intervals of feeling very important."

"And older than ever, I presume."

"Oh, yes. I find it quite easy to invest myself with white hair, dressed *à la Pompadour*, and snapping black eyes."

"Do you notice that you create an extra impression upon your pupils?"

Kate laughed. "I am afraid my imagination does not soar to that height."

"May I ask what excuse you offered to Mrs. Langdon for your refusal of her invitation? Your theories are somewhat novel to me. I am curious to know how you carry them out."

"Oh, it was a simple enough matter in this case. I knew she had only asked us to please Madam Severance, and I told her it would not be convenient for us to accept."

"I imagined you allowed yourself to be guided by the Madam."

"I do, mainly. She taught me some sensible ideas on the subject of girls, like my sister and myself, undertaking the burdens of society while we had other burdens to carry. Of late she has seemed to recant; but I cannot follow her blindly. I saw her former course plainly, and recognized its sense; and I shall depart from it cautiously."

"Heavens!" thought Exton. "How my mother would admire that!"

"Should you," he asked aloud, after a moment of silence, "consider it very presumptuous in me to hold ideas on the subject?"

The lovely pale pink brought into Kate's cheeks by the bright air, deepened at this. She raised her eyes to his and smiled. "Not to hold them, certainly," she said. "But I could not conscientiously urge you to unfold them, for I cannot conceive of their being worth anything."

Mr. Exton laughed. "You are very discouraging," he answered. "Fortunately for me, it runs in the Exton family not to be easily rebuffed. May I unfold them at my own risk?"

"You may. I shall take a certain interest in listening to the views on such a subject of one whose silver spoon has never been snatched from his mouth."

"As to your going into society, I do not presume to have an opinion," returned Exton, rather hurriedly; "but, as Madam Sevrance is a shrewd woman of business, if she urges you to go, it is probably with an ulterior financial object. What I had to say,—and the nearer I get to it, the more appalling it becomes to have to say it,—perhaps, after all, I had better retreat. Discretion is the better part of valor."

"But retreat is impossible," exclaimed Kate. "My curiosity is aroused." Her heart beat fast as she spoke, for her pride took fright. Was he going to criticise her singing?

"Well, then, I have taken the liberty of watching you sometimes, Miss Standish, and it has oc-

‘rred to me to regret that your manner was not more affable.”

“Affable! My manner!” exclaimed the girl, amazed.

“Yes, at the church; among the people. I have heard occasional criticisms and complaints which might easily be avoided if you were more willing to meet advances half way. I have remarked myself that you are apt either to be cold or on the defensive.”

Kate blushed. “Is it really so?” she said, humbly. “What a miserable attitude for a woman who wants to be liked!”

“Very,” assented the other, looking down on her earnest beauty.

“Then the people in the church do not like me,” she continued, with quick comprehension.

“Some of them do; an occasional one does—exremely.”

“You saw me at Mrs. Farrar’s,” she went on, looking up anxiously, and causing her companion hastily to avert his gaze; “didn’t I do better there?”

“You did, indeed. I should suppose you would have felt your power pleasantly enough to make you resolve to use it always.”

“I do not think I am naturally disagreeable,” she continued, with a little, meditative frown.

“I am sure of it,” returned Exton, devoutly.

“On the defensive! Oh I am ashamed that it should have struck you so, a stranger!”

“Not a stranger any longer, please remember.”

"Mr. Exton," Kate looked up from her unpleasant reverie, "I do so wish you would tell me something."

"Then I shall if I can, of course."

"I want very much to know who it is who is paying a part of my salary at church."

"Do I understand you?" Mr. Exton frowned meditatively.

"You must. Being on the music committee, you must know who the gentleman is."

"You are mistaken. It is as much of a mystery to nearly all the committee as it is to you."

Kate sighed. "I am disappointed. I hoped you could and would tell me. I find it annoys me not to know. As soon as I learned about it I tried to put it out of my mind. I resolved never to think of it again; but it is of no use; I cannot help speculating about it. I find myself on Sunday gazing over the congregation in search of my benefactor. If I happen to catch the eye of a benevolent looking old gentleman, I grow warm all over. If I have a solo I am wondering all through it whether I am satisfying him. I," — Kate laughed nervously, "I constantly suspect him of regretting his bargain. Before any discussion came up about me I never had any such feelings. I suppose because I was inexperienced it never occurred to me, so long as Madam Sevrance was pleased, to disturb myself about any one else's opinion."

"I am sorry you were told of it," returned her companion. "Ray was a little officious on that occasion, although without doubt his motives were generous."

"I am sure they were," said Kate, lowering her lids over her flashing eyes. She congratulated herself on the dispassionateness with which she was able to discuss this matter with one of those who had been the cause of her trouble. "I hope you do not suppose, Mr. Exton, that I deny the committee's right to please themselves, only sometimes I wish that my unknown benefactor had not put me under so heavy an obligation."

They walked on for half a minute in silence, then Mr. Exton spoke. "Since the matter is distressing you, Miss Standish, I think I may risk committing a breach of confidence so far as to admit that I know the man who is indulging himself in your voice."

"Ah, then, you will tell me who he is?"

"I can't do that, it wouldn't be right; but I can allay your fears with regard to his satisfaction. He is a sincere person, and he looked me squarely in the eyes a few days since, and said he, speaking of this matter, 'I never made so satisfactory an investment in my life. Miss Standish's voice grows better and better. Her singing is dearer and dearer to me as every week passes by. I should like to engage her to sing to me daily, but as that cannot be I make the most of this.'"

Kate looked up with wide, delighted eyes, and met the speaker's earnest, flushed face.

"Did he really say all that?" she asked, slowly.

"Every word of it and more too. Shall I go on?"

"Oh, no," said the girl, with a little laugh. "Aunt

Ann says, 'praise to the face is open disgrace.' That is a plenty for one day. It relieves me so much. He is — is he — I suppose he is a *nice* man?" she asked, a little doubtfully.

"Oh — a — oh, yes. My mother thinks very highly of him," replied Exton, gravely.

"Ah, that is all right then," said Kate, in a relieved tone. "I may take his money and his compliments gratefully. Why, you have walked quite home with me, Mr. Exton, and there is Margery in the window. She is always at home before me."

Mr. Exton lifted his hat to the bright face in the parlor window, and lingered a minute.

"You will remember the warning about my mother, Miss Standish?"

"Yes, although I feel sure it is useless, and you, Mr. Exton, please do not tell my unknown friend of my inquisitiveness."

She looked very handsome and happy as she made her request, and she read it in his eyes as he answered her.

"I give you my word he shall know nothing of it unless you tell him yourself."

"Good-bye, then," she said, with sudden haste.

"Good morning."

CHAPTER XIX.

MARGERY RECEIVES.

MARGERY met her sister at the door, or rather she lay in wait behind it until Kate should have come in, fearing lest Mr. Exton might catch sight of the indecorous eagerness in her face.

"How did he happen to, Kate?" she burst forth.

"Mercy! You frightened me, child. What do you mean by bounding out upon people like a jack-in-the-box?"

"Come into the parlor," said Margery. "There is no one there, and it is no use to go up stairs before dinner. There is a box for you."

"Not another florist's box?"

"The same. Mrs. Brown says it came fifteen minutes after you had started for church."

"Margery! Oh, *dear!*"

"Cheer up, cheer up, sweet one," said Margery, gushingly. "Shall I open it for you?"

"No, I thank you." Kate sat down and untied the box, taking from it a large bunch of English violets.

Margery seated herself and stared at them while Kate inhaled their fragrance with reluctant lovingness.

"That is the fourth," said Margery, oracularly. "One for Mrs. Farrar's; one last Sunday, which you wore to church; one Friday—for no reason whatever," here Kate blushed guiltily; "one this morning, for you to wear to church, only they came too late."

"It is dreadful," said Kate, laying the flowers down. "It is not pleasant to be haunted by anything, not even violets."

"I should think it would make you feel criminal," said Margery, coolly, "to think how much you are costing somebody."

"*Don't* mention that side of it, Margery," begged the other. "Mr. Exton said that flowers should always be anonymous. I think they should also not cost anything."

"Oh, Mr. Exton said that. Perhaps he sends them."

Kate raised her eyebrows. "Perhaps he does, or else it is the Shah of Persia. This isn't a very deep mystery to me, Margie. I teach two or three girls who affect to worship me, either of whom is able to indulge in this safety valve for her affection. It would be a bore to find out her secret and to be obliged to be grateful; but I love the violets. The freak won't last long."

"Or her pocket money, either," suggested Margery.

"Here, dear," and Kate divided the flowers, "fasten half of these in your dress."

"Not one wretched little blue flower," returned the other firmly. "My feelings are injured to think the Jacqueminots have never been repeated."

"Margery," and Kate looked meditatively at her sister, resting her elbow in her hand and softly touching her chin with her bouquet, "I am ashamed of myself."

"I'm delighted," said the other, promptly. "Is it because you let Mr. Exton walk home with you? It is a wonder he arrived here without being frozen."

"Oh, it is not so cold."

"No, but you are."

"I shall never be again, Margery. Henceforth I am going through life bowing and smiling like — like —"

"Like a happy combination of a Mandarin and Cheshire cat," suggested Margery, kindly. "I am delighted again. What has transformed you?"

"Why, Mr. Exton. He has — has noticed it."

"Noticed what?"

"Why, how *disagreeable* I am."

"And told you so? How invigorating!"

"He did it very nicely," said Kate, with dignity.

"Just so he did it convincingly, I do not care how he managed it."

"Why, Margery," Kate looked up ruefully, "I'm nice to *you*, dear."

"Yes," returned the other, grimly, "especially when you underhandedly refuse invitations to dancing parties."

"My dear girl! That is exactly what I am ashamed of. How did you find out? I was just going to tell you this minute."

"Mr. Ingalls told me. I met him at the door as I

was going to church. He wished to go with me, but I would not allow it. *I am faithful to you.* After calling me your partner and all! Oh, Kate, I am surprised!"

"Margery, it looks hideous to me now. Let me tell you how it happened."

"Oh, *happened!*" repeated Margery, cruelly.

"She came — Mrs. Langdon came — one day when you were out, and asked us — merely from politeness to Madam Sevrance, merely for that, Margery —"

"What do I care for her motive, if her floor and music were good?"

"You weren't here to consult with. I knew we should ruin the only fine dresses we had. I knew I had no right to fatigue myself, and you could not go without me. After I had refused and she had gone, I asked myself why I need trouble you with vain regrets; *voilà tout!* But it was a mistake. I will not do it again. You should have been told."

"And I should have gone," said Margery, mutinously. "I know Ray Ingalls dances like an archangel. He wished so much that I had been there."

"It would be delightful to dance again, Margery," said Kate, looking straight over her sister's head, and speaking musingly.

"Oh, you are human, then?"

"Very human. I think sometimes of how it would have been had mother and father lived, and the money not slipped away. How beautiful the old house was!"

"Yes. It would have been a good house to enter-

It is a pity we were not old enough to appreciate. I should like to give a party in a gorgeous but of course I should not offend your principles by inviting you."

"Kate laughed, "that will be after you have met the rich man. Shall you recognize me in ten days, Margery?"

Mrs. Brown's sharpened-tongued little dinner-bell rang and tapped the castle-building.

"I only say you forgive me, dear," urged Kate.

"I do, it is for the last time," said Margery, stiffly. "Of course you will never be called upon again. I will not tell you I had erred for the last time?"

"For this once, then," returned Margery, graciously. "I must tell me after dinner how His Serene Highness happened to escort you home; and, by the way, Aunt Ann told me this morning that Mr. Wiley would be delighted to have me practise on his piano." "I hope she did not ask the favor."

"No. He inquired whether we played and she said yes, and then he offered. I mean to take advantage of it."

"Do you?" Kate's tone was doubtful, but her faith in herself had been shaken. She was meeker than Margery had expected.

"Yes," replied the latter, firmly. "I shall begin to-morrow."

On the Wednesday thereafter, when Kate returned for her regular round of lessons, she found Margery with no indication of news in her expressive face.

"Good," said Kate, "you have something amusing to tell me. Nothing has gone right to-day. I shall be grateful for a laugh."

"Well, nothing has gone right here either," replied Margery, taking her sister's hat and cloak, and brimming over with a little chuckle of merriment. "I was sitting in the front window this afternoon when I noticed an elegant carriage pass. The horses shone so like satin, the harness was so fine, and the driver so scrupulously correct, that I heaved an awful sigh of envy as it passed. I was darning stockings, and I had scarcely turned my head back and begun on a new hole when lo and behold there was a sound in the street, I looked out, and there was the carriage again. Imagine my surprise when it stopped in front of this house. I drew back from the window, heard the bell ring, and in a minute up came Betty with a card for me. I seized it and read 'Mrs. John Exton.' Judge of my state of mind. I nearly fainted away. My first thought was that *he* had married, and his bride was down stairs!"

"Sensible," remarked Kate, as Margery made a dramatic pause.

"Very. I questioned Betty in the most wild-eyed manner as to the lady's personal appearance, and when I learned she had white hair I plucked up courage and went down stairs. Kate Standish, I suffered as much in the next five minutes as I ever did in my life. *The parlor was being swept!* Betty had seated that elegant old lady in one of those nightmarish old rep

chairs close by the parlor door where she had the full benefit of the turnips that were being cooked for dinner. There was a *mêlée* of old furniture pressing upon her from behind — ”

“Oh!” exclaimed Kate, goaded beyond endurance.

“I wished I was in the cellar! I wished I was on the top of the house! I wished I was dead and buried! But there I was, very much alive and blushing all over, face to face with Mrs. Exton. She looked nearly as uncomfortable as I did; and when she saw me, I knew instantly that she had expected to see you instead.

“She bowed, and half rose. ‘I—excuse me, I wished to see Miss Standish,’ she said.

“‘My sister is out,’ I replied. ‘I am sorry. I am also very sorry that you should have been received here so uncomfortably.’

“‘It is no matter,’ she said, rising. ‘I should be glad to have your sister call upon me if she can make it convenient. What is her first disengaged day?’

“‘Saturday,’ said I.

“‘Very well, I shall hope to see her then. Good afternoon,’ and with that she went. There,” and Margery leaned back in her chair and challenged her sister’s amazement.

“Oh, Margery!” said Kate, her face flushed with annoyance.

“You should have seen her clothes,” observed Margery, with the calmness of despair, “and her eyes, her

son's eyes, trying not to see our shabbiness; and her nose, John Exton's nose, smelling our turnips!"

"Margery," said Kate, earnestly, clasping her hands tightly in her lap, "here is a moral. I would not have you miss it for anything. This will surely bring you to agree with me. Had we not gone to Mrs. Farrar's, Mrs. Exton would never have disturbed our peace of mind. I am not ashamed of the way we must live."

"Oh, no," exclaimed Margery, derisively.

"But I do not care to have it sharply contrasted with other ways of living. You see for us to strain every nerve and manage to make good figures in society, only makes us a sort of impostors. How could Mrs. Exton imagine from my appearance at Mrs. Farrar's that she should find me situated this way? It is mortifying," and Kate rose and crossed to her bureau with a repressed, restless air, and a glowing face.

"Shall you go to see her Saturday?"

"Certainly."

"What do you suppose she wants of you?"

"I shall be able to enlighten you Saturday evening."

"It can't be teaching. Mr. Ingalls' mother was her only daughter. Perhaps it is something about John," added Margery, irrepressibly.

Kate's delicate lip curled. "Couldn't you call him Jack?" she suggested. "We are such hail fellows well met with the whole family, it is foolish to stand on ceremony."

"There is Aunt Ann, I know her step," cried Margery, unabashed, running to open the door for the new-comer who brought an atmosphere of bright content with her.

"I just ran in for a few minutes," said the latter, cheerily. "Ray has gone out of course, and Mr. Sharp and Mr. Wiley, too. Mr. Herring is reading there by the grate fire, and I thought, as long as Kits was willing to keep him company, I'd just come in for a cosey chat. Why, what is the matter, girls? You look as if you might have been spatting."

"Oh, no," said Margery, virtuously, "Kate had just spatting me once when you came in. She is sorry for it now. That is what makes her look so sober."

Kate turned with a smile to her aunt. "Sit down. We are always glad of your visits. Margery and I have been pin-pricked to-day, and we are smarting a little. Tell her about it, Margie."

Aunt Ann listened to the tale and laughed in a heartily amused fashion that in itself did them both good. "You aren't going to make a trial out of that?" she said.

"Why, we were considering it seriously," replied Margery.

"I never would," said Aunt Ann. "Mrs. Exton would probably be sorry to think you lived with folks that never swept. The old lady must have sense enough to make allowances. I'm sure she has."

"But the turnips," groaned Kate. "They were dreadful when I came in."

"There's nothing wicked about turnips, I hope," said Aunt Ann, mildly.

"Oh, if you are going to judge everything by that standard," observed Margery.

"I don't know a better one."

"Well, it is wicked to be an impostor," said Kate. "That is what Margery and I are if we affect in society to live nicely."

"One thing is," said Margery, hopefully, "whatever Mrs. Exton came for, she was not discouraged by our surroundings. She might easily have gone away without leaving any message."

"You foolish girl, why should that please you?" asked Kate, scornfully.

"What does she want of you, dearie?" asked Aunt Ann.

Kate shrugged her shoulders. "I do not know. I suppose she wishes me to sing for some charity. It will be something of that kind."

"Or else she will order you never to allow her son to walk home from church with you again," said Margery, mischievously. "You are in great danger, according to Madam Sevrance."

"I am in no danger according to Madam Sevrance," returned Kate, coldly. "I am in the class below criticism."

"How is that, Kate?" asked Aunt Ann.

"Madam Sevrance says Mrs. Exton is very jealous of her son. She does not like him to be attentive to ladies, although she does not worry about girls like

Margery and me. Of course he very seldom meets with such; but as circumstances would have it, he has met us, and Madam Sevrance evidently thought we needed a warning."

It cost Kate something to make this statement, but she was in a mood to be unsparing of herself. A glow of surprise and righteous indignation mounted slowly over Aunt Ann's face. Margery laughed outright at its expression.

"Count ten, Aunt Ann," she cried, warningly.

"The impudent critter!" exclaimed Miss Eaton. "How did she dare speak so to my girls! I like Mr. Exton; he's a good honest feller; but as to his being too good for either of you, why it's — it's a lie."

"Hear, hear!" cried Margery.

"I should like to know what the woman means," continued Aunt Ann, much ruffled. "Beautifully brought up, beautifully educated, beautifully behaved girls! Why I — pooh! I'd like to see — H'm!" Aunt Ann wandered off into incoherent mumblings.

Kate smiled, and took the speaker's hand in both of hers. "Madam Sevrance thinks only too highly of us — of me at least. I could tell you ever so many reasons for her belief, only it is not worth the exertion, and probably I should not convince you after all."

"Why, you don't suppose Uncle John thinks that way?" asked Aunt Ann, excitedly.

"That he is too good for us? Oh, no, he probably does not say it to himself in so many words," replied Kate.

"Well, do you think he wouldn't marry you?" pursued Aunt Ann, with unabated earnestness.

"Mercy! Aunt Ann, don't talk so loud!" exclaimed Margery, softly. "Somebody will hear you. We can't find out, you know, because it is not leap year; so do not get so excited."

Aunt Ann seized her younger niece by the wrist. "You used to talk a string of nonsense about him," she said, as sternly as she was able. "Now I don't believe, Margery Standish, that you care for that man."

"Then you are very much mistaken," said Margery, obstinately.

"Margery," said her aunt, "it isn't right for you to have any secrets from Kate and me."

"I do not make much of a secret of it, I'm sure," returned the girl, raising her eyebrows.

"Can't you see, Aunt Ann," said Kate, impatiently, "she would like to mislead us both."

"It is not a matter to joke on," said Aunt Ann, solemnly. "I am very sorry for you, Margery, if you think it is. This matter of love is the greatest, most sacred subject in the world. Everything else circles around it, depends upon it. Let anybody pick up a story paper or a book. If his eye falls on a love passage, won't he feel a sudden interest in it? No matter how wise the reader may be, and how poor the story, it will hold the attention as long as it deals with that topic. It is the tremendous strength of the subject that folks feel without understanding it half the time. The old, old story. Yes, I should think so; old as the

old, and yet always new. Too many approach it in joking way. Young folks are apt to think it's smart make fun of it and sham indifference to it. If the time never comes when they feel otherwise, they are fortunate indeed. Some folks with the best intentions make a mistake in their love affairs. I did. But the worst mistake of all is to cultivate a joking, frivolous feeling about marriage. Don't let me hear you say it. It's wicked and it worries me."

Kate kept her eyes down and patted the hand she held; Margery looked up, quite meek and a little frightened.

"I do not love Mr. Exton at all," she said, gently.

Aunt Ann kissed her cheek. "I thought so. Be careful that you never do, seeing he is such an extraordinary mortal. No one will ever persuade me that he thinks so much of himself. He's too *really* fine to say so."

"He is, Aunt Ann," said Kate, quietly. "He is really fine."

CHAPTER XX.

A BUSINESS OFFER.

WHEN Saturday arrived, to the girls' infinite disgust, a mixture of snow and rain descended, and the slushy streets and gray sky were of a similar color.

"There goes my last opportunity of making a respectable impression," said Kate, looking out of the window, dismally. "I must take a veil, overshoes, umbrella, and waterproof into Beacon Street. I shall remind Mrs. Exton of our dwelling; but I don't care," turning suddenly on Margery, with her chin uplifted. "Did you suppose I did?"

"No, indeed," replied her sister. "I know you rejoice in it, Kate. Couldn't you carry a turnip in each hand, to intensify the association. It would be so honest and above-board, and make her sure we hadn't moved. I'm getting fearfully tired of Mrs. Brown's, Kate," continued the girl, plaintively. "Aunt Ann is such a perfect cook. It fairly makes me hungry to think of her table. Why can't we move in there?"

Margery made this bold demand with utter hopelessness; but as soon as it had escaped her lips, she became sanguine. "Why, truly," she continued, "what

“The reason is there why we couldn’t? Don’t gentlemen and ladies always board together?”

“Yes, in a boarding-house,” said Kate, suavely.

“Well?”

“Well, that house belongs to the gentlemen who are living in it. I have not had an invitation to come here.”

“Oh, I did not think of that,” observed Margery. Kate, it is an awful day,” she added, as the window rattled. “Do have a *coupé*, for once.”

“No, my love,” said the other, lightly. “Is it eleven o’clock yet? I’m going at eleven. I would rather go before lunch, as it is a business call.”

“Then it is time. I will get your things.”

Kate enveloped herself in her waterproof, and Margery adjusted her veil.

“It is very fortunate for me to-day that my carriage passes the door,” said the former. “Now, then, I’m ready,” and Kate gave herself one comprehensive glance in the mirror.

“And you do not look like an impostor at all, dear, thanks to the weather,” said Margery, soothingly.

Arrived at the number on Beacon Street designated by Mrs. Exton’s card, Kate was shown by a servant to a small reception-room. She had left her dripping umbrella in the vestibule, and she took off her waterproof and folded it wrong side out, before venturing to sit down in one of the richly covered chairs. There was a pile of blazing logs in the fireplace, and a large vase of roses on the mantel.

This is *his* home. That was the girl's all-pervading thought. She tried to associate John Exton with the surroundings, and had seated him in every available spot in the room, to try his effect, before she realized what she was doing. Then she started, and frowned out of the window at the drizzling downfall, as seen between the curtains. It was after ten minutes of waiting that the servant returned and asked her if she would walk up stairs.

She followed him to a room, the door of which stood open. Another open fire, more flowers, curtains half drawn; Kate had time only to notice this, when Mrs. Exton spoke.

"Walk in, Miss Standish. You were very good to come in spite of wind and weather. Baker, take Miss Standish's waterproof. Sit right here by me, please. This is one of the days when I must keep very quiet."

"Then, perhaps, it is not convenient for you to see me. I can easily come again." Kate came close to her hostess, who was lying on a lounge, propped up with pillows, and shook the offered hand.

"No, indeed, sit right down. Bodily quiet is all I need to-day. It will do me no harm to talk a little, quietly. The weather is so disagreeable and chilly, and I am a great sufferer from atmospheric changes. Close the door after you, Baker."

"I was sorry not to be at home when you called," said Kate, taking the chair indicated. Somehow, now that she was face to face with Mrs. Exton, face to face with the luxuries of a home into which money and

taste had brought every possible comfort and indulgence, her own spirit and courage rose. The memory of Mrs. Exton's unfortunate visit seemed less, not more, crushing than it had done. This poor lady, her face white and her forehead wrinkled with fretting pain, drew out her tenderness and compassion, instead of exciting her awe. It was not half so dreadful to live in a house sometimes mismanaged and odorous, and to work for a decent living, as to lie here and suffer in the lap of luxury.

"Yes, I regretted it also," rejoined the invalid, "but I somewhat expected not to find you, knowing you to be occupied away from home a part of the time. Have you a large class?"

"Not very; but it is growing. Madam Sevrance encourages me to believe that it may grow as large as I can manage. If you know her, you know she is a staunch friend. Of course I should have but a poor chance without her influence."

"Yes, I know her. She taught my daughter a short time after her marriage. She was but little known here then, and my husband met her and took an interest in her. I think she is a very conscientious woman."

"Oh, thoroughly so," replied Kate, warmly.

"So she must believe you to be a good teacher, else she would not recommend you." Mrs. Exton talked with her eyes roving to and from her visitor's face.

"Yes," replied the girl, simply, "she has taken

great pains to make me a good teacher, and I have studied hard."

"Do you like the work?"

Kate hesitated. "Yes," she said, after a moment, "probably better than any other that I could do."

"I do not believe you like it."

"Why should you think that, Mrs. Exton?"

"You are too much of a musician. You sing too well. It must annoy you intolerably to meet with stupidity and the lack of all musical requisites such as exists in half of the girls who cultivate their voices."

"It is annoying," said Kate, simply. "What of that? I have no right to expect an easy life."

Mrs. Exton smiled. "That is the right spirit in which to fight the world's battles. Nevertheless, I have a proposition to make to you, which I trust you will not refuse. It cannot fail, I think, to give you an easier life than your present one. I want you to come and live with me. You look surprised. You think it is a sudden request coming from one who does not know you well. Your face is enough — that is, your face and your voice together. Dismiss your pupils, retain your position in church, and make your home with me. I dare say you never considered the subject of living as companion to any one, but you are exactly fitted for it. You speak deliciously, you move reposefully, you sing remarkably. In a word, my heart is set upon you and I cannot take a refusal. I will pay you adequately."

"Oh, Mrs. Exton!" exclaimed Kate, the son's warn-

ing coming back upon her with sudden clearness. "I am sorry to disappoint you —"

"You must not do it," interrupted the old lady. "I told you my heart is set upon it. I shall overcome any obstacle you choose to suggest."

"You do not understand," said Kate, gently. "I am so sorry to be obliged to disappoint you, but I have a sister. That young girl you met when you came to see me is my sister."

"Yes," said Mrs. Exton, curtly. "I knew you had a sister. What difference need that make? Your aunt, I never can remember her name, Ray's house-keeper, can take her."

Kate breathed faster and her color rose. "Would you advise that, Mrs. Exton? Do you think it would be well for my sister to go into that masculine household."

"Oh, well — perhaps not," returned the old lady, remembering Ray and his cordial partisanship; "but she is near by. Her aunt could look after her. There is no reason why she should stand in your light."

"I cannot see that it is standing in my light to prevent my coming here. What future would such a life as you propose offer me?"

"That would depend upon yourself. If you prove to be what I think you are, if you are of a good even temper, I should want to keep you with me as long as I live, and, in return for your devotion, I should give you a place in my will."

Kate colored. She was filled with mingled sensations of indignation, gratitude, and astonishment.

"It surprises me very much, Mrs. Exton," she said, after a pause, during which the old lady watched her closely, "to find that you are sufficiently pleased with me in this short time to induce you to make me such an offer."

"That is my affair," said the other, with a tinge of hauteur which chilled Kate's effort at gentleness. "It is a purely business matter. You have attractions which I wish to purchase to brighten a lonely life. It is an entirely selfish transaction on my part."

Kate smiled a little at the latter clause, as though perhaps she regarded it as superfluous.

"Are you willing to make the bargain?" pursued the invalid, with impatience.

"It is impossible," said Kate. "If you understood, you would not ask me to leave Margery."

"Well, you couldn't bring her," said the other, quickly. "I cannot have young people, noisy young people, about."

"Believe me, I did not consider such a thing," returned Kate, flushing.

"But I must have you. I am too much alone, and one of these days my son will marry, and then there ought to be some one to help me bear it."

"There are dozens of young ladies —" began Kate, when the other interrupted her.

"There is none for me but you," she said obstinately. "It is very bad for me to be so excited, Miss

Standish. I wish you would be reasonable and accept such a manifestly good offer as mine, good for you and good for me. Your sister would be better off. You could do more for her."

"All this only makes it harder for us both," said Kate, firmly. "I cannot accede to your wishes, for many reasons. Nothing would induce me to leave Margery; so you see that is obstacle enough, if there were no other."

"How will it be when you marry?"

"Marriage does not enter into my calculations."

"Ah, that suits me," returned the other, in a gratified tone.

Kate bit her lip. "You speak as though you thought I should alter my mind and come to you."

Mrs. Exton raised her eyebrows. "I do, in fact, feel certain of it."

"You were never more mistaken," rejoined the girl, rising, her slim, round figure looking tall in its dark, loose-fitting garments. "To tell you the truth, I am entirely unwilling to sacrifice the independence of my life so far. I have not the patience, the equable temper you desire. At the same time," she added confidently, taking a step forward, "I should like to do anything I can for you."

"Indeed? After refusing the only thing I ask?" rejoined the other.

"You ask too much," said the girl, with quiet pride. "I will not give up an honorable profession to become sort of upper servant to an invalid, thereby desert-

ing the sister who is all in all to me ; but I will come here and sing to you or read to you whenever my engagements will allow me."

"I am very tired. I will not detain you longer to-day," said the other, wearily, turning her head away on the pillow.

Kate hesitated. "Can I get you anything?" she asked. "Or shall I speak to a servant as I go out?"

"Do not trouble yourself. Excuse my lack of formality. Good morning."

Kate waited a moment to see if the white face would turn to her once more; but as there was no movement, she said "good morning," took her waterproof and left the room, oppressed with a bewildered sense of injustice. At the foot of the staircase, she came face to face with John Exton on his way up to his mother's room. The excitement in the girl's countenance did not escape him.

"Miss Standish, you have been with my mother."

"Do persons always leave her presence in a tearful condition? Is that the way you know?" asked Kate, passing her hand across her eyes with an impatient movement.

"I apologize for her humbly," he replied. "What can I get for you, do for you, Miss Standish?" for Kate was looking about vaguely.

"Oh, I remember," she said; "I left my umbrella in the vestibule."

Mr. Exton felt awkwardly, deeply, distressed. It was lunch time, and his mother was letting this guest

go inhospitably, and with an arrow of unkindness in her breast.

"I wish I knew —" he began.

Kate cast a flashing glance up at him. "You did know. You knew what she was going to ask, and you allowed it."

"But you refused," he said, eagerly.

She gave him a little scornful smile. "Did you think I needed to be warned to refuse to leave Margery?" she asked.

"Ah, I forgot Margery!" he exclaimed.

"I thought so," she replied, and moved toward the door.

"It is storming harder than ever, Miss Standish," he said, with his hand on the door-handle. "I will ring for my carriage. It is all ready. I have just come home in it."

"No, indeed, I would much rather go in the car."

"But you detest street cars."

"And your carriage also to-day, I fear, Mr. Exton."

"Miss Standish, what did she say to you? I know she is wilful, imperious; but how has she hurt you?"

Kate looked at him with an effort at self-possession. Her lips trembled, and she burst into tears. Exton drew her into the little reception-room, and closed the door. His hold on her arm recalled her self-control. She moved away from him and held her handkerchief to her eyes, but was perfectly quiet.

"You do not know — I cannot tell you how I regret this," he said, feeling more helpless than ever in

his life before. Then he stood silent, surveying the graceful figure and drooping head.

In a minute, to his infinite relief, Kate looked up with the ghost of her sweet smile. He took her hand again and came a step nearer.

"This will do me good," she said with broken cheeriness.

"What?" he asked, looking into her eyes eagerly.

"Why, that little cry."

"Oh, yes, I see. The little cry," he repeated vaguely.

Kate looked down at his hand before she drew hers away. What if the invalid above stairs should suddenly become clairvoyant!

"Yes, I think it has cleared the atmosphere," she said, releasing her hand. "Your mother is very much vexed with me, too much so to accept any offer I can make her, but she may feel differently later; and if ever she wants me to sing for her or to do anything that I can do, please remember that I will come."

"You are very kind. I suppose she has not deserved it. You have discovered that so far as you are concerned your intuition regarding her was correct."

"I must go," said Kate, turning abruptly.

"And you will not have the carriage, even to oblige me?"

"I am not in an obliging mood," returned the girl.

Mr. Exton put her waterproof about her shoulders and opened the door for her.

"You are not — where are you going?" she asked,

pausing, for he had taken his hat from the table in passing.

"I am going with you to the cars."

"Please don't. It is your lunch time."

"It is yours too. We will be fellow-sufferers since fate orders it so."

The storm had abated by the time Kate reached Berkshire Street. She found Aunt Ann with her basket of socks, sitting with Margery, and the two looked up expectantly as Kate walked in.

"Had your lunch?" they exclaimed in a breath.

"Yes, indeed."

"What did you have?" asked Margery, with intense interest.

"Ham and fried rice. Bread and butter and prunes."

"Do you mean you lunched here?" demanded Margery, justly incensed.

"Of course; just now."

"Well, that was polite of Mrs. Exton, after keeping you so long. What did she want you for. We've been guessing, Aunt Ann and I," continued the girl, briskly, relieving her sister of the wraps she carried over her arm. "I guessed simply that she had taken a fancy to you and wanted you to come and see her, and Aunt Ann guessed — oh, how furious you would be if you knew what Aunt Ann guessed," and Margery laughed a laugh of utter enjoyment, while Aunt Ann shook a sock at her and frowned. "Is it an elegant house, Kate?"

"Very," replied the other, drawing a chair close to Aunt Ann, with plain intent to assist her.

"All right, Kate, if you want to help," said Aunt Ann, pulling over the contents of the basket. "No, no, don't take that; it's Mr. Herring's. It does beat all how that man pounds through his heels. There's one of Ray's, that won't try your patience. So it's a fine house, you say."

"Very," repeated Kate, selecting her needle and cotton.

"Don't be monosyllabic," said Margery, impatiently, "just as if you were a man. Tell us about it."

"Well, I was ushered first into a little room all fire and Jacqueminots; then I was taken up stairs into Mrs. Exton's room."

"Well, that was friendly," said Aunt Ann, beaming pleasantly over her spectacles.

"Does it favor your guess, Aunt Ann?" asked Kate, smiling at her work.

"Yes, yes, that's about what she'd do, ain't it, Margery?" and Aunt Ann winked furtively at her younger niece.

"Wait," said Margery, "my guess was right."

"No, it was not," remarked Kate, quietly. "Mrs. Exton is much of the time an invalid, and she wants a companion; some one to live with her, amuse her, read to her, sing to her, and above all," added Kate, looking up into Aunt Ann's eyes, "to help her to bear her loneliness when her son is married."

"Is the feller engaged?" exclaimed Aunt Ann.

"I don't know, but Mrs. Exton wanted me to be that companion."

"You don't say so!" ejaculated Miss Eaton, but Margery stared and turned pale.

Kate held a hand out to her. "Comical, wasn't it, dear?"

"Oh, Kate!"

Kate laughed softly, and her eyes, full of quick tears, looked tenderly into her sister's.

"Not such a bad offer," said Aunt Ann, practically.

"No, indeed," said Kate. "She promised to pay me well and to remember me in her will."

Aunt Ann dropped her hand, loosely enveloped in Mr. Herring's sock.

"You don't say so!" she ejaculated. "In other words she offered to adopt you."

Kate laughed, and the sound brought the color back to Margery's face. "Not a bit of it, my dear aunt," she said, gayly. "She was careful to make me understand that it would be purely a business arrangement."

"Well, what did you say?"

"That I could not leave Margery."

"Why, *I* could have taken Margery," said Aunt Ann, simply.

Kate bit her lip. Was it true that there was a possibility that duty lay in so repugnant a path, and that she was shirking it under a mistaken idea? A glance up at Margery reassured her.

"Would you have *liked* to do it?" asked the latter, in a subdued way.

"I can think of nothing that I should like less," said Kate, honestly.

"Oh, all right then," said Margery, drawing a long breath. "How did Mrs. Exton take your refusal."

"Very ill. She very nearly refused to take it at all. Do not let us talk about it, I am glad it is over."

"H'm," said Aunt Ann. "I guess, from what Ray says, the old lady's pretty high-headed. I shouldn't wonder, Kate, but what you'd had enough of her already."

"Well," said the girl, smiling and raising her eyebrows, "I must say that provided you were an old lady and needed such a thing, Aunt Ann, I should rather be your companion than Mrs. Exton's."

Aunt Ann laughed in a pleasant, low fashion she had. "I'm an old lady now," she said, driving her darning needle briskly in and out.

"Ho!" said Kate. "Aunt Ann, I call that fishing."

CHAPTER XXI.

AUNT ANN OPENS HER HEART.

SPRING had come. Although nothing in nature corroborated the fact, the almanac asserted it, and there was comfort in that. Aunt Ann began to think wistfully of her little farm; and many and long were the harangues which Kits listened to on the text, "There's no place like home."

One evening her family had scattered to their various engagements, and she sat by the lamp in the parlor reading the paper. Kits had his favorite place on the rug, and the fire leaped and crackled gayly. It was a cosy and comfortable situation; but Aunt Ann's face did not express its usual placid content. She sat with her elbow resting on Margery's table-scarf, and allowed her paper to slip down to the floor unnoticed, while her eyes looked miles away into the sitting-room at home. Ray Ingalls entered the room, and aroused her from her reverie.

"Why, Ray," she said, looking up kindly, "is it possible you ain't going out to-night?"

"Yes, I believe I won't go out," replied the newcomer, rather wearily. "Certainly not if you are going to be alone."

"I don't mind it, my dear. I am often alone here with Kits in the evening. Don't stay in for me, will you?"

Ray pulled a chair toward the fire, and flung himself into it.

"I don't know, though, but what I ought to urge you to rest a little more," she continued, scrutinizing his face with some concern. "Seems to me you're looking sort o' lantern-jawed, Ray. I think all this dissipation is too much for you."

"Well, it is nearly over now," said the young fellow, "and I'm willing. I don't care for it."

"That's queer, too, at your age," mused Aunt Ann. "But it's the spring o' the year, and most likely you're bilious. It's surprising how it affects a body's spirits. If you'd just let me give you a little something, Ray," added Aunt Ann, persuasively.

"I wish you would, I'm sure."

"Well, now, you're a good boy," she replied, in pleased surprise. "Boneset's the thing, you may be sure; I'll get some to-morrow."

"No, it isn't," said Ray, with rather a gloomy smile. "Heart's-ease would be better."

"They don't make tea of that," rejoined Aunt Ann, quickly.

"No, I don't believe they do."

"Oh, I see what you're driving at," said the other, watching him with a shy interest. "You think your trouble is of the mind."

"The trouble is that I am in love, Aunt Ann, and you knew that before."

"Well, that ought not to be a trouble."

A brightness came into Ray's brown eyes as he raised them. "What do you mean?" he asked. "Do you think she cares for me?"

"I don't know anything about it."

"What do you think?"

"I really don't know," said Aunt Ann again. "I've tried not to think much about it. You are too young, dear, to be sure of yourself."

Ray started from his chair, and stood in front of her, resting his hand on her shoulder.

"Aunt Ann, look up at me," he said, quietly; and, as she obeyed, he continued, "Do you believe I am going to tell you the truth?"

"I believe you think so; well, then," for his eyes flashed, and his mouth looked firm, "yes, I do."

"Then believe that I love Margery as well as I could if I were fifty, and that I shall never love any one else. Now you must know what it is to me to see her so seldom, not to know what her real feelings are regarding me, to be put off and put off when I try to meet her, when I try even to speak of her."

This last was a thrust at Aunt Ann, and she knew it.

"My dear, all this won't hurt you a bit if you get her in the end," she replied tranquilly, gazing at him through her spectacles.

Ray's grasp tightened on her shoulder. "Bless you!" he ejaculated. "Then you think I shall get her?"

"You needn't make my shoulder black and blue, if I do," remarked Aunt Ann, smiling. "Go and sit

down. I'm sure I don't know whether you will or not. Kate's very odd, and Margery won't oppose her when it comes to anything serious ; but one thing I'm pretty sure of, she doesn't care for any one else."

"No, no, indeed ; I believe not," replied Ray, hastily.

"Up to lately I some thought she did," said Aunt Ann, with a little air of dignity.

"Who?" demanded the other, explosively.

"The idea of your glaring at me that way, Ray Ingalls. 'Tain't likely you'll ever know who. I certainly sha'n't tell you ; and it doesn't make the least difference who it is, for she told me there was no truth in it. I will simply say that he is a very rich man, some older than you are."

With this dignified statement Aunt Ann contented herself ; but she saw that matters with Ray were approaching a crisis, and in her tender love for Margery she determined to do what, according to her simple and straightforward ideas, would best insure her niece's safety and happiness. She determined to lay the whole matter before the cool and impartial mind of Uncle John. If there were any reason why Ray should not marry Margery and make her happy, it ought to be known immediately, before the young man could make an opportunity to declare his passion.

Having decided rather suddenly upon this course, Aunt Ann was prompt in her action. The next day found her for the second time in Mr. Exton's private office.

"I'm most ashamed to trouble you again," she remarked, shaking his hand as he rose to greet her.

"You need not feel so," replied Exton. "I know that you never go on idle errands." And, motioning her to a chair, he sat down beside his desk, and turned his serious, attentive eyes upon her.

Aunt Ann cleared her throat. "I've been noticing," she began, "that Ray don't look well lately. Have you thought of it?"

"Well, no. I have thought him a little moody."

"That's it, sort o' fretful, and not much appetite; and yes, he's thinner, considerable thinner."

"He has been dancing too much, and sleeping too little, perhaps."

"Yes, I know he has; and you know he has some weakness of the lungs."

"Oh, I think not," said the other sceptically; "Ray is hearty enough."

"Well, what I came to tell you," said Aunt Ann, with a little hesitation, "is that he lays it all to being in love."

Exton repressed his sudden smile, seeing his visitor's gravity. "Did he confide in you entirely?"

"Yes. You know he's an honest boy, and I'm fond of him; but I'm fonder of Margery, my niece," said Aunt Ann, simply, "and it's her he's in love with."

Mr. Exton leaned back in his chair, and fixed his gaze on the bronze door-handle.

"I have been somewhat prepared for this," he said. "Haven't you?"

"Yes and no," replied Aunt Ann. "I never believed it was a deep and lasting feeling, until last night."

They were both silent for a time, then Exton spoke.

"What does the young lady say?"

"Bless you, she doesn't say anything," responded Aunt Ann, so suddenly as to cause another smile to flit across her companion's face. "He doesn't get a chance to see her very often; and he's getting so desperate now that I'm afraid he'll begin to make chances, and so I came to you."

"How do you think your niece regards Ray?" was Exton's next question, put in rather a constrained manner.

"I know she likes him very well, and that's all I do know. That can all come afterward," added Aunt Ann, with an unusual show of firmness. "I've come here looking for just causes and impediments, if you know of any. I don't want Ray should go near Margery again unless it's all right for him to."

"Do you mean financially right?" asked Exton, shifting his gaze to Aunt Ann's face.

"I hadn't thought of the money part of it, but that's important too. They couldn't live on nothing. What I did think of was whether such a match would be agreeable to his family. I wanted not to have all the responsibility of favoring it or not favoring it on my shoulders. So far I've kept out of it. My conscience is as clear as crystal, whichever way it goes. Now, tell me, Mr. Exton, your full mind about it."

There was a slight frown on Exton's face, and he dropped his eyes. "I am sorry this experience has come to Ray quite so early in life," he said. "As for Miss Margery, I am willing he should marry her; but unfortunately my willingness does not count for much. His money, — he has a few thousands, — does not come to him before he is twenty-five, without my mother's permission."

"Well, they could wait a few years, I suppose," said Aunt Ann, meditatively; "that is, if your mother should refuse her permission; but why should she?"

"There is no telling what she would say after she saw Miss Margery," returned Exton, evasively.

Aunt Ann suddenly remembered Kate's words, and her cheeks grew red. "Perhaps I understand," she said, in an altered tone. "It wouldn't be a brilliant marriage, and it wouldn't satisfy your mother."

"No," replied the other, straightening himself; "to be frank with you, it would not. If I knew Miss Margery's feelings to be involved, I would do my best to bring it about; but not knowing whether she would favor Ray in any case, I dislike to worry my mother with the matter."

"Mr. Exton," said Aunt Ann, rising and speaking very distinctly, "I trust you may never have to. I don't want the match one mite more than you do. My girls are both heart-whole and happy, and any change would as likely be for the worse as for the better. Except for the one matter of money, I would match

'em against any girls of their age in this city; and to speak very frankly with you, sir, I don't know of any man, certainly none that I've ever seen, that's good enough for either of 'em. I'll bid you good morning, sir."

"Miss Eaton —"

"Let me go, sir. Don't stand against the door, if you please."

"You must not leave this place thinking that the question of money would decide my mother. Cannot you understand? One has ambitions toward an old family, a name —"

"Just come to Cedarville, Mr. Exton, and tell somebody there that the Eatons ain't an old family. Just come, sir, and try it, some day when you ain't busy. I'll go now, if you please; I've heard enough. Kate told me that you and your mother looked down on us. I was silly enough to stand up for you, and urge that you had a good, broad mind, and was above such small notions."

"Thank you for your good opinion. I should have said, too, that you were too fair to ask me to express my full mind, and then become indignant with me for doing so."

Aunt Ann's lips twitched, and she began to waver.

"I hardly think," continued Exton, "that either of us, however much we may wish it, will be able to prevent Ray from proposing to Miss Margery."

"I might run away with her down to Cedarville," suggested Aunt Ann, tremulously.

"Ray would follow you by the next train," replied Exton.

"In five minutes' talk with Kate I can make all safe," said Aunt Ann, with sudden mournfulness. "You needn't worry. Something tells me that she won't favor the match, and I need only tell her what you've said."

"I hope you won't do that, Miss Eaton. It seems to me you are a little hard on Miss Margery."

"I hard on Margery! Well, that from *you*, Mr. Exton!"

"Yes. The first thing is to find out if she loves Ray. If she does, matters must be arranged."

Aunt Ann looked incredulous, and her eyes sparkled. She bit her lip undecidedly. "You mean—do you mean—" she faltered.

"To assist them? Yes, certainly."

"But if your ma holds out?" Aunt Ann clasped and unclasped her black gloves.

John Exton smiled. "If I wish to lend Ray money, I can do so on safe security."

"Mr. Exton," said Aunt Ann, in a shaking voice, taking his hand in both of hers, "I want you should let me take back anything I've said that—that ain't true, and that don't thank you."

"I shall not bear malice," he replied. "I do not believe there is anything more you can do about this, Miss Eaton. Perhaps you might as well leave it to me."

"Oh, will you take it?"

"I will do what I can. You know third parties are not often successful in their interference in these matters, and I shall interfere as little as possible."

"Well, I leave it to you gratefully," said Aunt Ann, shaking his hand heartily. "Look here, I want you should tell me one thing honestly."

Exton smiled, and looked doubtful. "It doesn't do to be too honest with you," he said.

"Pshaw," exclaimed Aunt Ann, with a little shake of her head, "you make me ashamed. Don't think I shall fire up again, because I sha'n't. You said you was willing Ray should marry Margery. Did you mean that? Should you be perfectly satisfied to take her around as your nephew's wife; or would you like something else better for Ray?"

"It seems to me you are not very wise to ask these questions," returned Exton. "It would be a great convenience if people could fall in love always in a direction to offend nobody's ideas of appropriateness."

"Those girls," said Aunt Ann, "lived like little princesses when they were children. Suppose the money had lasted; then I presume Margery would have been appropriate enough."

"No, that does not make the difference. However, if you only want to know my attitude, I can assure you that I do not question the wisdom of Ray's choice; and if Miss Margery sees fit to connect herself with our family, I shall do my best to prevent her regretting the step."

Aunt Ann took her leave somewhat puzzled, but on

the whole with a grateful sensation of trust in Uncle John, and of relief from further responsibility in the matter.

It was on that evening that Ray Ingalls had the unusual good fortune to meet Margery at the foot of the steps, as they were both returning from the city.

"Good evening," said the girl, pleasantly, but with the evident intention of saying no more.

Ray held out his hand as they went side by side up their respective steps, and Margery gave him her left one.

"I was coming in to see you this evening," he said, trying to speak as though calling upon his next-door neighbors were an event of common occurrence.

"Oh, then, it is fortunate that I met you. You can tell me now what it is you want." There was nothing cold or reserved in the girl's tone; but nevertheless Ray felt himself to be held off at a hopeless distance.

"I want to know first why I may not call on you," he said, brusquely. "Are you afraid if I commenced coming I should prove myself a bore?"

"Of course I don't think any such thing," said Margery, coloring. "I know very well you have too many attractive places to call, to care to come often to see us. It is simply that we have no quiet place to receive anybody in, and Kate doesn't — we do not try to entertain any one."

"Well, I want to come. I want to see you, to talk with you," answered Ray, quickly. "If you do not

wish me to come in there, will you go with me to hear Miss Thursby Friday night?"

Margery caught her breath at the boldness of the proposal. "Oh, wouldn't that be delightful!" she exclaimed.

"Then you will go. Thank you. I will not detain you." And bowing, Ray rushed precipitately into the house, without waiting for the inevitable "if" or "but" which was so sure to crush his hopes.

Margery went in and up stairs, her heart beating rather quickly. She felt intuitively that this little doorstep episode was a turning-point in her life. Should she have strength enough of mind to withstand Kate's objections? She had never been out anywhere with any gentleman but her father. Ray's invitation seemed to her nearly as portentous as an invitation to elope would appear to a more sophisticated damsel.

Kate was at home before her, and upon Margery's entrance the former greeted her brightly.

"Good news, Margie," she said; "Madam Sevrance has tickets for us to go with her to hear Miss Thursby Friday night."

Margery stared blankly, but immediately turned her dismay into a smile.

"How odd that is — I mean that it should happen just now. Mr. Ingalls," with a bold rush at the difficulty, "has just invited me to go with him."

"Well, this previous invitation which I have accepted for you will be a perfect excuse. How fortunate!" observed Kate.

Margery sat down in a chair facing her. Her fluffy hair, bright eyes, high color, and a general air of audacity, chained her sister's uneasy attention.

"I'm not sure, Kate," she said, deliberately, "that I want any excuse. I think I would like to go with Mr. Ingalls."

"Why, Margery!"

"Is it very strange that I should prefer to go with somebody who considers that I am doing him a favor, rather than to be tucked in behind Madam Sevrance's cold shoulder, and forgotten all the evening, while she converses with you about larynxes and diaphragms?"

"Why, Margery!"

"I shall be nineteen next month, old enough to be married, and plenty old enough to decide a little thing like this for myself, and I'm going with him."

"Why, Margery!"

Margery laughed. "You have that little phrase perfectly, Kate."

"Be careful, dear, or this will lead to trouble," said Kate, gravely, after a moment of silence. "Ray Ingalls admires you very much. If it should come to anything serious, the Extons would be displeased."

Margery's eyes flashed blue light. "I will be careful," she said, quietly.

"Well," sighed Kate, with a half smile, "you have made a declaration of independence."

"Yes, my love," said the other, gayly; "and I thought you might be so obstreperous that I should have to read the riot act also."

CHAPTER XXII.

RAY CROSSES THE RUBICON.

It gave Kate a strange sensation on Friday evening to look across the audience and see Margery seated in another part of the house. Madam Sevrance did not express much astonishment on being told of her defection. Kate was somewhat surprised by her calm reply.

“Ah, indeed. Going with young Ingalls? He is rather a desirable person to know — that is very pleasant for Margery.”

There could be no doubt, Kate thought, as she looked at her sister, that it was pleasant for her escort as well. Margery looked as pretty in her cleverly devised costume as she could have done if it had cost a small fortune; and Ray being a handsome young fellow, especially under his present pressure of happiness, Kate was not the only person present who took especial notice of them. To these two every number on the programme was perfection. Ray went during the intermission to speak with Madam Sevrance and Kate, and Margery watched his movements with demure satisfaction.

"I do think he has the nicest walk. Oh, I'm afraid I like worldly people!" she mused, with a quiet little sigh and a downward glance at the splendid roses on her breast. Ray returned, moving with the nonchalant air which had won her good opinion, but there was nothing nonchalant in his expression as he resumed his seat.

"Madam Sevrance and Miss Standish are going to ——'s to supper after the concert," he said. "I promised that we would meet them there. Was that right?"

"Quite right," replied Margery, promptly.

She had received unexceptionable flowers, she had come to the concert in a carriage, she had been entertained and deferred to all the evening. It was fitting that the finishing touch should be added by a supper at the fashionable ——'s.

But when they arrived there, to Margery's surprise Ray led her to a table quite remote from the one at which Kate and her chaperone were sitting.

"Oh, I thought we were going to be with Kate," she said.

"It doesn't matter, does it?" asked Ray.

"There is room at their table," suggested Margery.

"But you see I am afraid they might talk to you."

"Well," ejaculated the girl, smiling.

"You don't care for Madam Sevrance, I'm sure, and you can have Kate at home."

"I do not see why you call her Kate," observed Margery, feeling it incumbent upon her to find fault

with him on some pretext, as an offset to the meekness with which she seated herself at the table.

"Beg pardon; Miss Standish. Ah, there is Uncle John. Isn't he a splendid looking fellow?"

Ray said this as he took his own seat, and Margery, following his glance, looked toward the entrance and saw Mr. Exton come in, in evening dress and alone. He was an impressive looking man, and it gave Margery another pleasurable thrill when, bowing to many acquaintances, he singled her out and came toward her. The gods were providing many gifts for her to-night, so she did not ask why he shook her hand so cordially, and greeted her with such marked kindness.

"Sorry there isn't room to offer you a place here, Uncle John," said Ray, unblushingly.

"Thank you," replied the new-comer. "Do not let it deprive you of your appetite. Have you been hearing Miss Thursby?" he added, addressing Margery.

"Yes, and I had never heard her," replied the girl, "so I need not tell you how delighted I have been. Mr. Ingalls and I both said we never enjoyed a concert so much in our lives."

"Indeed!" said Exton, gravely. "I ought not to have missed it. I see your sister is here."

"Yes," said Margery, casting a pitying glance across the gay crowd to where Kate sat; poor Kate, with no worshipping brown eyes seeking her approval, no distinguished individual leaning over her chair.

"Yes, Kate is here with Madam Sevrance."

"I must go and see them"; and lo, in a moment it

as over Kate's chair that the distinguished individual was leaning, and as Margery looked she saw Exton accept an evident invitation from Madam Sevrance, and take a seat beside her. Then the watcher gave a sigh of satisfaction and turned her attention to the *menu*.

It was with sincere regret that she stepped at last into the carriage, and started for home.

"Such a pleasant evening," she exclaimed, as Ray took his place beside her.

Without replying, her escort immediately thrust his head out the window. "Drive slowly!" he ordered.

"Oh — you needn't have done that," said Margery, a little startled.

"Why not? Do you mean that I am to see you again in a day or two?"

"No, not that I know of. Maybe —"

"Ah," said Ray, with a shake of the head, "maybes are not flying this month. We children at school used to consider that a crushing sarcasm, and I trust you get my full meaning. I am not going to give up a bird in the hand for any number in the bush. I know enough to make the most of this drive. Still I have some hope that the spell is broken now. Do you mean to be kinder to me in future? Will you treat me as other young ladies do?"

"How do they treat you?" asked Margery, dejectedly.

"As if they liked me, — some of them," said Ray, looking at her steadily.

"So do I, I'm sure," she returned, in an injured fashion. "Haven't I been to a concert with you to-night, the first time I ever went out with a gentleman?"

"Is it, really?" said Ray, joyfully.

"Yes, indeed."

"And you have enjoyed yourself?"

"More than I can say."

"Then you will let me take you soon again."

"No, I think not *soon*."

"Why?"

"Because I do not care to go anywhere again, soon. What an awful story!" added Margery. "I should like to go somewhere almost every evening. How you young men must enjoy yourselves, able to go when and where you please."

"We do not care to go alone," said Ray, and he spoke less glibly. "Miss Margery, — Margery, is it for propriety's sake that you put me off, or is it because I bore you?"

"For shame, Mr. Ingalls — a brilliant society man fishing for a compliment."

"Don't make game of me," pleaded Ray. "I am in earnest. Forgive me for cornering you, but in this carriage you can't get away from me, and from the first day I met you you have been escaping me at every turn. I want to know what you really want me to do."

"Oh, I only want you to be entertaining for the next fifteen or twenty minutes."

"And after that to let you alone for an indefinite period?" Ray added this question quite suddenly, and fiercely, and with such marked intention to get a definite answer, that Margery caught her breath a little, as though a gust of wind had blown in her face.

"Why, — no, I shouldn't like that at all," she confessed.

"Margery, you have become the whole world to me," he exclaimed, impulsively. "It would be folly to try to tell you how much I love you. Everything else is absorbed in it. Nothing has power to interest me any more except as it refers in some way to you. I seem to have lost the memory of any time when you were not the central figure in my thoughts, night and day. Do you know the old German song,

'Thee loved I ever, I love but thee,
And thee will I love to eternity.'

It is forever in my mind, the best expression of the truth. Don't shrink from me, Margery. Do not—"

"I think you are not very fair, Mr. Ingalls," she said, as steadily as the excited beating of her heart would allow.

"I cannot be fair. You will not let me. I did not mean to speak to-night; but I might have known I could not help it. To be so near you, to be alone with you, to love you so dearly. You cannot be angry with one who puts himself completely at your mercy. Say that you will try to like me, Margery. See; I do not try to touch so much as the hem of your garment.

I will obey you in everything, only say that you are not angry, and that I may hope."

He paused; but Margery was silent.

"Have you never thought of this?" he urged. "No, I did not mean to ask that. Have I shocked you?"

"You have surprised me very much," said Margery, gravely. Her self-possession was restored. She no longer felt frightened, although the blood ran quickly through her veins, and tingled in her very finger-tips. "I have no right to encourage you to believe that we can ever be more to each other than we are now."

"I am encouraged already," said Ray, quickly. "Forgive me; but if it is only a question of right and wrong, I know I can show you that it is right for us to—to love each other. Margery," he turned and leaned his arm on the cushion near her shoulder, thereby more nearly facing her, "don't you think if you gave me your hand now there would be more probability of your giving me your heart later on?"

Margery clasped her hands tightly in her lap. "Perhaps; but that is the very reason I must not do it. I must not give you—anything."

Ray drew a long breath. "We could talk a great deal better," he said, and suddenly Margery felt his hand slip between hers, and take one of them in its clasp. "There, you have given nothing," he said; "I take this on my own responsibility."

She tried to release herself, but was gently held firm. "Just a minute, Margery, while we talk this thing over."

"I want to talk it over impartially," she replied, falteringly.

"I don't want you to, dear," he replied.

Margery yielded for an instant to the spell of his will, then caught her breath with sudden determination. "Mr. Ingalls, you said you would obey me. I am in earnest," she said. "I want you," tucking her recovered hand underneath its mate, "I want you to know that I appreciate the honor you do me —"

"Don't! That is what the heroine of a novel always says just previous to refusing the hero. Do not say that. It is ominous," protested Ray, who was in a transport of hopefulness; "and call me Ray. If I am to be discouraged, at least show me that clemency."

"It is a very pretty name. I will call you by it if you wish," replied Margery, speaking seriously; "but I must really discourage you."

"On what grounds?"

"You need not know that."

Ray looked up suddenly. "That is a way you can baffle me, Margery," he answered, gravely; "but it is a strange return for what you were pleased to call 'the honor' I pay you."

"That is true," replied the girl, quickly. "It is due to you to understand clearly. For one thing, your family would be displeased — Mr. Exton and his mother."

"What of that? I do not ask you to marry them."

"But you know you would cause them great disappointment."

"You cannot care for me at all, if you consider that. However, I will not conceal from you that grandmother can make me a great deal of trouble if she chooses. My mother left her money so that I cannot touch it before I am twenty-five without grandmother's consent."

"Then you have three years to wait before you can marry, in any case. Why need you be so urgent?" asked Margery, with evident relief.

"Indeed, I have not," said Ray, ardently. "If you will let me take you to her, Margery, I give you my word that you will charm grandmother into consenting to anything."

"That is out of the question," said the girl, shaking her head; "and were your family not opposed, I would still not leave Kate."

Ray did not speak for a time, then he said: "Have I been deceiving myself? Do you not care for me?"

Margery maintained a resolute silence.

"Is there anybody else?"

"Nobody."

"Margery, dear, will you punish me because the other members of my family do not know and appreciate you?"

"I could never go among them unwelcome," said the girl, in a low tone.

"And you never should," returned Ray.

"But Kate," said Margery.

Ray knit his brows. "Kate must be married," he said, decisively.

Margery smiled involuntarily. "Very well," she said, "when Kate is married —" She hesitated.

"You will marry me?"

"You cannot think of such a thing for a long time."

"Are you afraid of poverty?" asked Ray, reproachfully.

"Very much," was the unexpected reply. "You see I have been acquainted with it. You have not."

"But we should not be poor," said Ray, eagerly. "I have a good salary; that is —" he hesitated.

"Yes," said Margery, "probably enough to buy all the dress suits and flowers required in your arduous existence. No," she added, more gently, "I am not so mercenary. I would marry a poor man if I loved him and he wished it; but I would not try to live with him in the city among all the accustomed pleasures which would now be just out of his reach. I would go away into the country somewhere, or out West to a ranch. What sort of a farmer do you think you would make?" She finished, breaking into a soft laugh at the idea.

"A good one, no doubt. I promise to succeed at everything I undertake, if you will say that you love me."

"Ah, Ray," replied the girl, calling him by his name for the first time, very gently, "if I should say that you would become unmanageable. There! I knew it," she exclaimed; for he had seized both her hands.

"Margery," he said, low and excitedly, "you have admitted it. Say it once, darling. I will do anything,

bear anything, for the sake of hearing you say once in so many words, 'Ray, I love you.'"

"But we are at home, there isn't time," she breathed.

"Yes, only four words; say it, Margery, *darling*."

The carriage stopped. The driver leaped down, and flung open the door.

Ray muttered something as he stepped out and gave his hand to Margery. She alighted, and the carriage rolled away.

"One moment before we go in," he pleaded.

"Not a moment."

They stood before Mrs. Brown's door. "Thank you for giving me a very pleasant evening," said the girl, unsteadily. It seemed to her that years had passed since they left the supper-room at ——'s.

"And you will not give me one thing to thank you for, Margery, one definite word of hope?"

She held the door partly open, and he could see her shy face dimly in the waning moonlight. "When Kate is married," she said, and slipped into the house.

Margery paused a minute after she was safely inside. She felt breathless; and it was not until she heard her name called softly from the head of the stairs that she began to ascend.

"I am coming, Kate," she replied, in the same low tone.

"I am relieved to see you," said Kate. "I could not understand why you should be so late. You left ——'s before we did."

"I suppose your horses came faster than ours," said Margery, carelessly. "Well, how have you enjoyed *imposturing* this evening?" she asked, as they passed into their room.

"It was a delightful concert," returned Kate, taking off the bunch of violets which had come just at the right time, as usual. "You seemed to be enjoying it."

"Yes, indeed. Mr. Ingalls and I thought it was the loveliest concert we had ever attended." Margery's enthusiasm had a warmed-over flavor, which did not escape her sister.

"You look a little tired, dear. You see going with Madam Sevrance and me has its compensations, after all. You do not have to exert yourself so much. I told you before you went, Margery," added Kate, confidentially, "that Ray Ingalls admired you very much. To-night convinced me of it. His manner was so devoted as to be noticeable. I dislike to put such thoughts into your head; but I am older than you are, to say nothing of being your sister, and I think I ought to warn you."

Margery sat down, and began slowly to unbutton her gloves. "It is going to be very troublesome if anybody does admire one of us, is it not?" she said.

Kate was half smiling, too pre-occupied with some pleasant thought of her own to notice her sister's unusual gravity.

"What? Oh, yes. So very troublesome that it ought to resign us to settling down into hopeless spin-

sterhood. But no one whom we should be willing to marry will ever want to marry one of us."

"Do you feel sure of it?"

"Oh, perfectly," said Kate, with an unconscious sigh.

"Well, if it should by some wonderful accident occur, do you not hope it will not happen to *you* to choose between me and some man?"

"No man could ever separate me from you, Margery."

"I knew it," said Margery, with more resignation than fervor.

"It would be utter desolation for the one that was left," observed Kate, musingly.

"Why, there is Aunt Ann," suggested Margery, half resentfully.

"Yes," said Kate, smiling, "and a home in Cedarville. I love Aunt Ann very much, but — she couldn't fill your place, Margery."

"Of course, neither of us would want to be *selfish*," suggested Margery. "Of course neither of us would stand in the way of the other's happiness."

"I know *you* are generous enough for anything," remarked Kate, "but we shall not be tempted, my child. Take Mr. Ingalls, for instance. Some girls in your place would draw him on to a proposal. There are girls who would be able to endure the criticism and coldness of his family; who would be willing to elbow their way into it, as it were. Ugh!" Kate shuddered. "We are falling into dangerous ways, my

dear," she continued, with heightened color and shining eyes. "Too many flowers and carriages, too many aristocratic acquaintances. Has Aunt Ann told you that she goes home in a month? The house was only taken until the first of May. I want you to go with her, Margery."

Margery looked up suddenly, with a defiance that immediately softened into surprise. "Without you?"

"I cannot go so soon. I only wish I could. When I can get away I will follow you."

Margery rose and went to the bureau. She straightened the gloves she had taken off, and drew them caressingly across her cheek. "I suppose I might as well be in Cedarville as in Boston," she said, as she laid them in her drawer.

CHAPTER XXIII.

UNCLE AND NEPHEW.

MR. EXTON decided, seeing Margery and Ray so friendly together, that they would probably be amply able to dispense with his aid in their affairs at least for some time to come. It surprised him then to be accosted by his nephew on the following day with the request for an interview, more especially as there was nothing in the young man's manner which differed from the thoughtful air common to him of late.

"You had better come home with me to dinner, Ray, so we can be undisturbed," Exton replied.

"Thank you, I will. I want to see grandmother, too."

Mrs. Exton, however, did not appear at the dinner table; and when the rather silent meal was over, the gentlemen repaired to Exton's den, a luxurious masculine retreat, where, amid the perfume of cigar smoke, Ray was invited to speak out. He did so without any explanatory preamble.

"I want to marry Miss Margery Standish," he said.

Exton nodded, and, crossing his right foot over his left knee, examined the heel of his slipper.

"You are not surprised," continued Ray, who had braced himself for some outbreak. "I expected you at the very least to say she wasn't good enough for me."

"In all probability she is vastly too good for you, you young jackanapes."

Ray started up, and, seizing the other's hand, wrung it with a painful grip.

"She is a thousand times too good!" he ejaculated. "Bless you for saying so."

"Nevertheless you aspire to her," said the other, unmoved by this ebullition.

"And if grandmother is of your opinion, I shall win her too," was the hopeful reply.

"But grandmother isn't," remarked Mr. Exton.

"You know that, do you?" asked Ray, with a frown.

"Only in a general way, but I am sufficiently sure. It is not what would be called a fitting match, Ray. Everybody will wonder at it," replied Exton, between the puffs of his cigar.

"Pshaw!" exclaimed the other, snapping his fingers contemptuously.

"I do not intend to waste time in trying to dissuade you. Have you proposed to her?"

"Yes."

"And she accepted you?"

"No."

"Ah," and Exton showed more interest. "If she has refused you, —"

"She has not, definitely."

"Perhaps I understand. She knows the state of your finances, and objects to such a long engagement. Make a clean breast of it, Ray. I'm with you in this thing, on one condition, and that is that the young lady's happiness depends upon marrying you."

Ray knitted his brows rather dubiously, and thought for a minute; then he looked up and met the other's gaze full. "I believe she loves me," he said.

"Very well," returned Exton, with a grave nod. "Now if a miracle should happen and my mother should consent to receive Miss Margery, all will go smoothly. You shall try your luck of course, and when you fail, as you will, come to me. You go ahead, and in proper course of time get married. I will see you through until you come into your own."

Ray's face lit up gratefully. "Thank you, Uncle John, —" he hesitated.

"Does not that remove your obstacles?"

"It ought to; but Margery has so much pride in the matter. She insists that such a marriage will be distasteful to my family, and that she will never come into it unwelcome. I think when she knows that you approve, she will be willing to compromise on that point; but the highest, broadest obstacle of all is one that even you, I'm afraid, can't remove."

"Well, 'a man can but do his best,'" quoted Exton, kindly. "What is required?"

"A husband for Miss Kate Standish," replied Ray, with a dejected smile.

Exton looked into the fire, and back again at his nephew. "What do you mean?"

"Margery says she will never leave her alone; says that only after Kate is married may I hope for anything from her."

"Well! Those sisters love each other."

"I should think so. A man could only get half of either of them, I believe," grumbled Ray.

Exton threw his cigar into the fire. "Half of Kate would be better than the whole of another woman," he said, hardly aware that he was thinking aloud.

Ray looked up at him. "Margery, you mean. Yes, that is what I tell myself; and once free from care and duty toward Kate, I think I could contrive to win her wholly."

"Miss Standish has very strong and decided ideas," said Exton.

"Oh, you don't know anything about it," began Ray, volubly. "She told me last night —"

"I am talking about Miss Kate," interrupted the other.

"Oh! oh, yes; she is not the sort of woman, unfortunately, to be married off easily. Margery thinks a prince of the blood would be honored by winning her."

"That is the opinion of some others," said Exton.

"What do you mean?"

"Why, I know a man who would be lifted to the seventh heaven at the thought of marrying her."

"Uncle John, you're a trump!" burst forth his nephew, effusively. "Give me his address, and see if I don't do something for you some time."

"Of course I shall do nothing of the sort," replied Exton, with a quiet smile.

"Well, then, do give him a nudge yourself," said Ray, impatiently. "What does he dawdle so for? Why don't he call on her?"

"She will not allow it."

"Oh, of course not; I forgot. Well, do what you can. Keep her in his mind. Get him to talk about her."

"He is willing enough to talk about her," replied Exton. "He thinks she is the loveliest creature he ever saw in his life. Her mouth, you know, is very handsome, proud, and sensitive."

"Yes; but nothing like Margery's."

"And her hair—"

"Oh, Margery's hair—"

"No, no, Kate's. It is such a soft color, and grows so prettily about her neck and temples," and Exton rose from his chair and began to walk up and down the room.

"But Margery's has those red lights in it," said Ray, convincingly, also rising and walking, passing and re-passing his companion in his march. "It gives it so much more life and character, you know; and then her eyes! they are positively on fire sometimes with vivacity."

"But Kate's have a steady light, as clear—"

A double knock at the door arrested the speech, and Exton hurriedly threw it open.

"Beg pardon, sir," said the servant. "I knocked twice because you didn't seem to hear me. Mrs. Exton sends word that if Mr. Ingalls is still here she would like to see him."

Exton turned toward Ray. "Here is your chance if you like to make the trial."

"Now as well as any time," said Ray, starting toward the door.

"As I have some writing to do," continued the other, "perhaps I shall not see you again to-night."

"Very well; I will not disturb you," returned Ray, holding out his hand. "And say, Uncle John, keep after that love-sick swain. My happiness hangs on it."

"No matter about his, I suppose."

"Oh, his will be all right of course. He is evidently blind and imbecile not to have fallen in love with Margery. Thank heaven the world is full of blind men, though."

Exton laughed and closed the door, and Ray, obtuse to everything but his absorbing hopes, ran up stairs two steps at a time to his grandmother's room. He paused on the threshold.

"Come in, dear," said the complaining voice. "Too bad I could not have come down to dinner with you. I was down last night and the night before, but that is the way things happen."

"I am sorry to find you suffering," said Ray, sitting

down beside the couch, and taking the wrinkled hand in his.

"Thank you; how have things gone with you lately?"

"Oh, up and down, grandmother." Ray knew how quickly the old lady would weary, and that every moment was precious. "The fact is, I have been falling in love."

"Well, that is a harmless amusement," said the other, with a wan smile. "All boys do it."

"I haven't gone into it as an amusement; I am in earnest. I have proposed to the young lady."

Mrs. Exton cried out. "My dear child, you shock me! You are not engaged?"

"No; the young lady insists upon waiting for your sanction and welcome."

"A great point in her favor, surely. Who is she? You have been wise, I hope, Ray. You have not forgotten who you are."

"She is an orphan; the sister of the young lady you admire so much. Her name is Margery Standish."

Mrs. Exton looked at him in silence, and drew away her hand.

"If you knew her, grandmother," he began, eagerly.

"I shall never know her," she said, firmly. "She was sensible enough to realize that, and in the course of three years, Ray, many things may happen."

"Nothing will ever change me," he returned, quite quiet now that he saw the sick woman's obduracy.

"If I live so long," said the latter, "I will do my best to keep you from making such a fatal mistake."

"You may live to believe it a wise step."

"You are determined to marry her, without money, without the approval of your friends!"

"If she will have me," returned Ray, thinking best not to bring his uncle's name into the affair; "but that is not yet certain. She is unwilling to leave her sister alone."

The indignant expression slowly died out of the invalid's eyes. "Her sister is loyal to her also," she said, musingly. "I wonder —" then she paused.

Ray was silent, waiting he knew not for what.

"You know I wanted Kate Standish to live with me. She refused on the score of having to remain with her sister. I wonder now if —" she hesitated, and Ray eagerly filled up the blank.

"The very thing," he said. "Give your consent and make us happy all around."

"Do you not see, Ray, it would be impossible for my companion to be the sister of your wife. You would have to move away from Boston."

"I would go abroad for a year. I promise you so much."

Mrs. Exton shook her head impatiently. "It would have to amount to a separation between us as to social relations."

"I think you are borrowing a good deal of trouble," said Ray, inwardly marvelling at the strong tenure upon empty forms held by this frail creature, whose

earthly course must be limited to a few years at most. "Better leave all that for the future to decide."

"Well," said Mrs. Exton, upon whom the old idea had returned with renewed strength, "then I consent to your marriage, and will make over to you at least a part of your property, on condition that Miss Standish gives up her teaching and comes here to live with me."

Ray was radiant. It looked to his pre-occupied mind a delightful way to dispose of Kate. It caused every obstacle to his happiness to melt away like dew before the sun.

"Thank you, grandmother," he said, and kissed her cheek gently. "Will you not send your love to Margery?" he added, rising. "She will be obdurate without a word of welcome."

"Yes, give her my love," sighed the sick woman. "After all, it is well to marry early. Do not bring her to see me, at least not until I send. I am not able. And say nothing of this talk to your uncle. I have good reasons for wishing it. Be sure to remember. Good night, Ray."

The next day at dinner was the time Aunt Ann had set to break the news to her family that she had decided to return home in May. The expressions of regret thus elicited were so kind and heartfelt as to cause her surprise and gratification.

"I was intending," Mr. Wiley said, "to see to-day if we could not prolong our lease."

Ray shook his head. "I promised Aunt Ann that

if she became tired of us she should go back in the spring."

"I am not tired of you at all," observed Aunt Ann. "You have all been very kind, and made me very happy here; but I must go home now and see how things are going. You will all be having your vacations along through the summer —"

"And we shall all want to come to Cedarville," interrupted Mr. Sharp.

"I'm going to take a couple of summer boarders," remarked Aunt Ann, with a happy little smile. "My two nieces."

She wondered that this bit of news elicited no question or comment from Ray. He seemed, however, in high spirits; and when dinner was over, and Aunt Ann's preparations for breakfast made, she found him alone in the parlor, pacing restlessly up and down, and waiting for her. He came toward her with outstretched hands and a joyful gleam in his eyes.

"I have proposed to Margery!" he exclaimed, softly.

"Law!" ejaculated Aunt Ann, giving his hands a convulsive shake.

"She feared the coldness of my family, and also to leave Kate. Last night I dined with Uncle John. He will welcome her cordially, and even grandmother sent her love to her, and gives her full consent provided Kate will come and live with her."

"Oh!" said Aunt Ann, in long-drawn ejaculation, falling from rapture to doubt. "I don't know as that'll do, Ray. You know Kate has refused to do that."

"But for Margery's sake, was it not? When she knows that Margery will be provided for, won't it be quite different?"

"It may. It would be a nice home for the child," returned Aunt Ann, "if only your grandma will be fond of her."

"She is fond of her. I never knew her so fond of anybody," averred Ray, fully persuaded that he spoke the truth. "And what I want you to do, Aunt Ann, is to go in there with me to-night, and, if the coast is clear, send Margery down into the parlor and let me tell her the good news."

"Take my advice," said Aunt Ann, astutely, "and see Kate first. First get on the right side of Kate and then you *are* all right. I've seen the girls to-day; funny they didn't let out a word of this."

"Well," replied Ray, quickly, "perhaps you're right. It will be more above board to have a talk with Kate. I dare say Margery would be better pleased."

"Depend upon it," replied the other.

"Then here goes," said Ray. "Wish me well, Aunt Ann."

"I do, indeed, dear. Margery is a precious child. If you win her, you will have a treasure."

"Sometimes I question whether she is a mortal or a will-o'-the-wisp," he said, as he took his hat. "Here is one more effort toward finding out, anyway."

Going out the door, he stepped over the railing and rang the bell of the next house, smiling as he did so,

to think how accessible and yet difficult of reach it had always been to him.

He gave his card to the servant and was shown into the dim parlor.

"I want to see Miss Kate Standish," he said; and Betty a minute later repeated the message and gave the card at the girls' door.

Kate and Margery put their heads together over it, Margery blushing and looking anxious, and Kate biting her lip with a puzzled air.

"I suppose we shall have to let him call on you once, as long as you went with him to the concert," said the latter.

"Not necessary at all," replied Margery, brusquely. "It is not as though I were a society girl."

The novelty of such a speech from her did not strike Kate in her pre-occupation.

"But he asked for me. How strange!" she said. "I think he is an artful youth," she added, shaking her head, "and wishes to break the ice thoroughly. I may as well let him understand that my mind has not changed. Tell him," she added to the servant, "that I am engaged and would like to be excused."

When Betty gave this message, Ray looked momentarily nonplussed.

"I wish you would go up once more," he said then, "and tell Miss Standish that my errand is important."

The girl obediently returned, mentally rating Miss Standish's taste very low. The idea of refusing to see such a tall, fine young gentleman as the caller!

Upon hearing the second message, Margery's anxiety increased.

"Well," said Kate, hesitating, "I suppose I must go down."

"Do not," begged her sister, with surprising earnestness. "Refuse again, Kate. Do, dear. Don't go down."

"Why not?" asked the other, suspiciously.

"Well," said Margery, with a sudden, almost gloomy change of manner, "go if you like; but remember I asked you not to."

"You frighten me, Margery," said Kate, in her quick, forceful way, and immediately left the room.

She found Ray standing, as once before, uncomfortably, in the dingy room, and, hurrying toward him, gave him her hand.

"Thank you, Miss Standish," he said, respectfully, "for seeing me. I am fortunate to find this room empty, because I wished very much to speak with you in private."

They both sat down, Kate never removing her large, questioning eyes from his face.

"I do not know whether your sister has told you." He paused interrogatively.

"She has told me nothing."

"I have asked her to marry me," said Ray, simply.

Kate started and drew back from him involuntarily. A hundred incidents thronged into her mind and explained themselves in the white light of this knowledge.

"I am here neither refused nor accepted until you decide."

"Did she leave it to me?" asked the girl.

"Not exactly; but she stated some obstacles to our marriage, which I am removing. One was the disfavor of my family."

"Of course," said Kate, with breathless eagerness.

"Which proved a mere man of straw," added Ray, waving his hand. "I have the cordial approval of my uncle, and my grandmother sends her love to Margery, with full consent to our marriage, on a condition which, if it proves agreeable to you, will remove all your sister's objections."

"What do you mean?"

"Margery firmly refused to leave you alone."

"And Mrs. Exton's condition?" asked Kate, growing very pale.

"Is that you should make your home with her."

Kate half rose from her chair, with a wild instinct of flight, then sank back. "Neither of us would want to be selfish; neither of us would wish to stand in the way of the other's happiness." She had not paid much attention to Margery when she said this; but now the words came back to her vividly, with an accompanying understanding of her sister's thoughts. "Wait, Mr. Ingalls," she said, faintly, for Ray had jumped up with the vague idea of ringing a bell and getting some water. "I am not ill. Wait one minute while I think."

Ray seated himself, watching her, half puzzled, half

remorseful. He supposed it was the thought of parting with Margery that had so agitated her.

"That is the only condition on which Mrs. Exton consents?" she said, after a moment.

"Yes. Her feeling would not be of particular importance to me but that she holds my property until I am twenty-five."

"Ah!" Kate thought fast. On one side was her freedom and Margery's sacrifice. On the other, a weary, confining routine, and the unspeakable trial of being under the same roof with John Exton — at the latter thought she lowered her head as though a physical burden had descended upon it; but on that side, too, lay Margery's happiness. Dear little Margery, kept so long on prison fare and now beckoned into a life in all ways congenial, with the man she loved! Slowly Kate lifted her head, breathing a deep and uncontrollable sigh.

"I will do it," she said, meeting Ray with her quiet gaze; "but be careful not to speak of it to Margery."

"Thank you, Miss Standish," he exclaimed, fervently. "I will make her as happy as I can, believe me."

"Do you understand?" she said, unheeding him, "Margery must know nothing of this condition."

"I understand," he replied, nodding with joyful alacrity. "She had better believe her welcome to be unhampered by conditions. When may I see her?"

"Whenever she likes, after to-night." Kate rose, and Ray followed her example.

"I am afraid you will find it hard to forgive me," he said, triumphant happiness in his eyes.

"A little — at first," she replied, with a brave attempt at an answering smile. "You know we —" a sob rose in her throat and choked her utterance; and, although she still looked at him, she saw nothing for tears.

He pressed her hand, and departed with merciful promptness.

Kate stood still a minute, resolutely battling for her self-control. She pressed her handkerchief lightly to her eyes, and opened a book on the discolored marble table. It was a copy of Scott's poems, in distressingly fine print. She opened to *Marmion* and read a few lines at random. Then she moved out into the hall and started up stairs. When she reached the top the rebellious tears had overflowed again, and she stole lightly down half way, and stood there drying them, and breathing a little prayer for strength. A second time she ascended and hurried down the narrow hall and into the room. Margery was sitting there idle, and evidently expectant. She looked up, and saw Kate standing, an arch expression in her eyes, and a tender smile on her lips; so beautiful and loving, that Margery, in her relief, and love, and remorse, started up, and flung her arms around her neck: —

"Oh, Kate, I couldn't help it!" she exclaimed, and burst into a passion of sobs.

Kate held and soothed her, her own shining eyes looking over her sister's bowed head, away into space.

"But you know I wouldn't leave you for *anything*. You know it, don't you, Kate? You know I never thought of it for an instant," she said, brokenly, as soon as she could speak.

"What great nonsense, dear!" returned the other, cheerfully. "Of course you won't leave me; at least, not for very long at a time. I should not think of allowing it. Ray is going to have a case of sister-in-law which will far outdo all the proverbial mothers-in-law. Who knows but what it will mercifully start a new subject for newspaper ridicule?"

"But I am not going to marry him," said Margery, holding her sister off by both arms, and facing her expectantly.

"Yes, you are, dear; it is all right. They all want you — Uncle John, and grandmother, and everybody. That is what Ray came in to tell me."

The color spread over Margery's face and throat. "Oh, I can't leave you," she said, in a low voice that trembled; but not, Kate felt, at the prospect of the coming separation.

"Do not speak of that any more. It is crossing such an unnecessary bridge. Think rather of how many pleasures you and Ray will give me."

"But how wonderful that they are willing, Kate, — the Extons."

"They have much better taste than I supposed," answered the other.

Margery hid her face again in her sister's neck. "Oh," she whispered, "it is too good to be true."

"It is not too good for you, my darling," murmured Kate. "Nothing could be too good for my little sister."

But long after Margery had fallen into a happy slumber, Kate lay with fixed, sleepless eyes, looking into her own future, re-adjusting every thought and hope, and summoning courage to meet it.

CHAPTER XXIV.

KATE'S DIPLOMACY.

"I ~~AM~~ going to tell Aunt Ann about it," she announced brightly to Margery, the following morning. "Do you remember when we were children how anxious each of us was to be the first to tell a bit of news? We were always saying, 'I choose to tell' this or that. Very well, I choose to tell Aunt Ann."

Margery laughed. "I hope you will find it is news to her; but I imagine Ray has confided in her. She has tried to be very wise and cautious; but she has said enough lately to make me suspect that he has been working on her sympathies."

A note was handed Margery as she was leaving the breakfast table. It said, —

Will you take a walk with me this evening.

RAY.

Margery's answer was brief enough to be the soul of wit. It was, —

Yes.

MARGERY.

To-night would settle it, Kate knew, and it must be the business of the leisure hours of her day to stop up every loophole through which Margery's happiness might escape.

She went first to the next house. Aunt Ann was surprised to receive so rare a visitor so early in the morning; but she shook her head as she greeted Kate. "My dear, you find me in trouble," she said. "Kits has been fighting. Such a terrible noise as I heard in the night, but I little thought Kits was in it until this morning when he came in looking worse than any tramp, his necktie torn off of him, his eye all closed up. Oh! It's time we were off to the country. Kits has got into bad company. I've talked to him and shut him up, and I hope he feels as bad as he looks. Well, dear, what's brought you so early. I can't flatter myself you've only come to visit me."

"That is all. When an event of importance occurs in the family it has to be talked over," said Kate. "I have only come to talk it over."

"Ray and Margery," ejaculated Aunt Ann, out of whose head Kits' misdemeanors had driven this romance. "Of course. I can see by your face that it is all right. It is a good match for Margery, I think. I am as pleased as a child over it. I didn't quite know how you'd take it, though, about living with the old lady. I'd have liked first-rate to have had you come right with me and kept you always, only Cedarville is no place for you."

"Yes, it is," replied Kate, wistfully, the cheerful light less bright in her face. "With — without Margery to work for," she added, with an effort, "I think my ambition would have oozed out and nothing would

have pleased me so well as to creep off into the country with you. But that is not to be."

"No, and a very good thing too," said Aunt Ann, earnestly; "there's no field there for you. You will stay in the city and be both useful and ornamental."

"Yes, in Mrs. Exton's sick-room. Well, that is settled; only I think, Aunt Ann, if Margery knew it, it would — that plan might annoy her."

"Why, no, child. She would be glad you would have such a good safe home until such a time as you got married yourself."

"I do not think she would look at it in that way, and then, don't you see, she must not think that Mrs. Exton will only receive her on a condition. You see that?"

"Surely, I didn't think of that."

"So you will be very careful not to say anything about my prospect of living with Mrs. Exton?" persisted Kate.

"Yes, I will. I'm glad you spoke of it. Don't you go to forgetting your poor relations when you come to be the young lady of that fine house," said Aunt Ann, jocosely. "Mrs. Exton is so fond of you that little by little you'll come to be the head. I see all how it's going to be."

"Lend me your spectacles," said Kate, rising to go.

"Oh, sit down, child. There is so much I want to ask you about Margery and Ray. You see I've been suspecting this thing a good while."

"I cannot wait, Aunt Ann. This is a busy day with me, and I must hurry."

"I hope this new arrangement isn't going to cheat me out of my visit from you girls this summer."

"I hope not; but as yet nothing is settled. We shall know in a few days whether plans must be much changed. Good-bye," and Kate took her leave.

The smiling and matter-of-fact manner which had served her through that interview would not be needed during the next visit. Kate's face when she rang the bell of the Extons' house was not a mask, and it did not put on so much as a smile when she was ushered into Mrs. Exton's sitting-room, where the old lady was leaning back in her arm-chair, enjoying the morning sunlight, and looking at a newspaper, while a breakfast tray stood by her elbow.

She dropped the paper and held out her hand to the girl graciously. "How fortunate that you should come this morning," she said. "This is an unusually good day with me. I believe I have entered upon another respite from suffering, and may hope to go about a little again. It is mournful business, nursing one's self, Miss Standish."

"I am glad you are better," said Kate, seating herself, after taking the languid hand. "I should have been sorry to find you unable to talk, for I want to ask you what it is that you wish me to do."

Mrs. Exton colored under her visitor's tone and manner. She was accustomed to much petting and

adulation from such feminine callers as she saw fit to receive. Who was Kate that she should not be moved to tenderness and admiration by the sight of the invalid's soft white curls, and the light blue ribbons of her white flannel wrapper? It was hard, cruel, in the girl to let her hostess see that she felt herself a victim of selfishness. Mrs. Exton hardly knew how to meet such indelicacy. As there ensued a pause of several seconds' duration, Kate continued, —

“Mr. Ingalls understood that you gave your consent to his marriage with my sister only on condition that I abandoned my work and came here to devote my time to you.” Kate's tone was neither angry nor spiteful, but it smote her listener with the first sensation of shame which had assailed her for many a year. “Was he right?”

“You choose to put it in a very disagreeable manner, Miss Standish. Of course such a change of plan must not occur against your will,” returned the invalid, firmly entrenching herself, after the momentary abasement, behind the bulwark of her pride.

“You know it is against my will,” burst forth Kate, impulsively.

“Why do you say that? You pretended that your sister was the obstacle to your coming. If that was simply pretence, say so, and leave me. After all that has occurred between us, one of two things must happen: you must accept the offer which I have gone out of my way to urge upon you, and which is the best you will ever receive from anybody; or else you

must refuse it once for all, and never come here to excite and worry me again."

Kate's lips parted eagerly. Oh, the glorious thought of escape! "And Margery?" she asked.

Mrs. Exton waved her hand, and the hard look which Kate had already learned stole over her face. "I have nothing to do with Miss Margery," she answered, with slighting coldness.

The color flamed into the girl's face and receded as suddenly. It required all her strong love for her sister to hold back the torrent of protest and reproach that sprung from her beating heart. She kept silence a moment, then:—

"I see," she said quietly, although there was a trembling in her voice. "You have calculated on my willingness to promote Margery's happiness, and you were right. I said, you know, when I came in, that I wanted to understand just what you wished of me. My mind is made up to accept your condi—your offer."

"Well, I am glad, I am sure," responded the other, with a bow of languid condescension. "I have no doubt that we shall get on most excellently together. Of course you will have to finish your term of teaching."

"Certainly. Of course, too, I shall have to get Margery ready to be married. I cannot leave her until after her wedding." Kate bit her lip sharply to make certain that the whole was not a dream. The idea of talking thus calmly with Mrs. Exton about Margery's wedding!

"Yes," said the other, meditatively. "Of course that is only right. I have thought of a plan—but I will not speak of it now, it may not be feasible. I think the wedding had better be in the early fall," she added, dispassionately, "so you can get settled comfortably here for the winter, and also that the young people may take their voyage at a pleasant season."

"What voyage?" asked Kate, mechanically.

"I think they will go abroad for a year or more."

"Who?"

"Why, the bride and groom," returned Mrs. Exton, with some impatience. "Ray wishes it, and I approve strongly."

"Oh!" said Kate. So they had been talking it over. Others had now the right to plan for Margery. They were going to take her away across the sea for an indefinite time. It was all so sudden and she was so helpless. She looked at Mrs. Exton. That querulous, pale face, with its anxious lines, was to be her constant companion now instead of Margery's, loving, hopeful, young, the sunshine of Kate's life. She rose suddenly in the unendurable stress of feeling.

"I—my morning is full of engagements," she said, recovering herself. "I must go."

Mrs. Exton gave her a thin, faint smile. "Come and see me again when you can. We have not made our business arrangements yet."

"Oh, plenty of time for that," replied Kate, hurriedly. "Mrs. Exton," she added, suddenly bethinking herself, "I do not want Margery to know that I

propose coming here. I have reasons; I cannot tell —," she hesitated.

"You need fear nothing from me," returned the other, a trifle disdainfully.

"I thought perhaps your son, —" suggested Kate.

"He knows nothing of it," said the old lady, shortly, "and I have no intention of discussing the subject with him. My son's home is very dear to him, Miss Standish. You will not misunderstand me when I say that the thought of a stranger entering our circle has always been an unpleasant one to him. I only mention it to make the more emphatic my gratitude at having found a person like yourself who will always know of her own intuition when, and when not, to be one of us."

Kate stood, tall and pale, her eyes cast down. When her companion finished speaking, she looked up. "Thank you for your confidence," she said, with a little bitter-sweet smile. "I trust if I should ever abuse it you will feel at liberty to recall me to a sense of my position."

Mrs. Exton looked, with some doubt at the door when her visitor had closed it after her, and pondered over the interview.

For Kate, she felt the beating of pulses in her head as she ran down the stone steps into the street. "Oh, Margery," she thought, "my darling Margery! Is there any doubt that I love you?"

CHAPTER XXV.

IN THE COUNTRY.

It was the end of June. The blue sky that shone above Berkshire Street seemed to speak to Kate of other scenes, more congenial, upon which it was smiling. Brick blocks and cobble-stones grew wearisome. She wanted the country, and green grass, and the song of the wild bird, and — Margery. She had an idea that if she could carry Margery off to Cedarville, to a Paradise into which the serpent, alias Ray Ingalls, could not penetrate every evening in the week, she might have one more little season of happy companionship with her before the final wrench of separation.

Aunt Ann had gone weeks before, quite disappointed to leave Margery behind, but the girl was frank in her preference for pavements over green fields, under existing circumstances, and flatly refused to leave Boston until Kate's engagements were over. There was an end of Margery's protestations against dullness, against poverty, against Mrs. Brown's back room and Mrs. Brown's table. The world had suddenly righted itself, and was whirling her on day

by day to great and greater happiness. Mr. Exton had been in the West on business for several weeks, and Ray lived at the house on Beacon Street, whence he descended every evening to the vicinity of his old home, and rang the bell of the once proscribed house, with the assurance of a welcome visitor.

Such lists of things to buy and to make as Kate and Margery discussed! Such piles of work as lay cut out in that little back room! But Margery was a witch with her needle and her sewing-machine, and the taste and judgment of both girls were sensible, so the preparations for the simple trousseau were made smoothly and swiftly. The time was drawing near when they were to leave for Cedarville.

"You know, Margery," said Kate, one day, trying to console her sister for the coming parting, "it will be such a nice place to accomplish our sewing, so quiet and free from interruption. You will not miss Ray nearly so much as you fear, I am sure."

Margery shook her head. "No, indeed, that is all right," she returned, "Ray finds he can spend his two weeks' vacation down there with us. Didn't I tell you? I must have forgotten."

Kate's countenance fell. "Oh, can he?" she said, trying not to let her disappointment be patent. Margery frequently forgot to mention things to her of late. The new confidant eclipsed the old; but Kate bore it all with wondrous patience and docility. Would any happiness suffice her if Margery were not content? Then should she not be philosophical

enough to accept Margery's happiness instead of her own? It seemed very simple to Kate in theory, only sometimes the actual walking of her path was rough and thorny.

She said now to herself, with the resolute determination to make the best of things, "Margery is preparing me for the change. The dear child doesn't know it, but she is saying and doing the very things that are best for me."

But Margery received a letter from Aunt Ann one day about now that proved a veritable bomb-shell, threatening to blow into pieces every peaceful and happy prospect of the summer.

"My dear Margery," it read, "I am delighted to think the time is so near when I shall see you and Kate again. Isn't it queer that Mrs. Exton should be so set on coming here? I have told her just how plain we are, but she insists; and no doubt it's all for the best, for she will get acquainted with you and find out what a darling grand-daughter she's going to have. She says she and her maid will come with you and Kate. You ought to see how glad Kits is to be home. I believe he's climbed every tree on the place. He—"

Margery dropped the letter and looked in surprise and dismay at Kate. The latter's eyes were glowing and her lips compressed.

"What a shame!" cried Margery, but not with much feeling. Her thoughts at once wandered to the fearful interest of meeting her prospective relative.

So far Mrs. Exton had sent civil messages by Ray, but she had always made some excuse for not receiving his *fiancée*. Margery quaked a little at the present prospect, but she was not without a certain pleasant excitement in it until she realized the effect of the news upon Kate. The fire died from the latter's eyes, and she picked up her sewing without a word.

"I don't see why you should turn white over it, Kate. She likes you. Now, if it had only been you whom Ray had fallen in love with."

Kate looked up. "It is like the nightmare," she said. "I wanted to be alone with you, Margery, a little while."

"Well we are certainly not going to be with *her*," returned Margery, with a little stirring of hurt pride. "She is nothing to us until she chooses to be something."

But on the way to Cedarville Mrs. Exton did choose to be graciousness itself. She listened to Margery, and accepted her attentions with such gratitude as a duchess might show. Kate scarcely spoke half a dozen words during the day, and Mrs. Exton asked nothing of her.

It was an undoubted relief to the whole party when Aunt Ann's cheery welcome amalgamated its diverse elements. Whatever variety of opinion there might be among the travellers, they were united in delight at the pleasant aspect of Aunt Ann's little farm, with its elms and its brook, its orchard surrounded by a

stone wall, and the hill that rose behind the house to keep off the north winds.

"Your home breathes of peace," said Mrs. Exton to Aunt Ann, growing complimentary in her pleasure at finding that her maid could have a small room opening directly from her own.

"How long it *will* breathe of peace," said Aunt Ann, as soon as she found herself alone with her nieces, "nobody can tell. Why, girls, why *didn't* you tell me she had a dog? Whatever Kits will say, I don't know."

"It is pretty safe to prophesy," returned Margery, laughing; "but we didn't know anything about her dog until it was taken out of the baggage car."

"It is no use to cry over spilt milk," observed Kate, "but why in the world, dear Aunt Ann, did you consent to take her?"

"Well," returned Aunt Ann, somewhat staggered, "I guess its because I'd always rather have a tooth out than say 'No.' I begin to mistrust I did wrong," she added, quite weighed down by the sudden certainty of disapproval on the part of Kits and Kate. "She's been sort of high-headed through it all, there didn't seem to be any other way, unless I'd said flat out, 'I don't want you, ma'am,' and perhaps if I'd known about that black-faced puppy I should have had strength to say it. One thing I thought, Kate," with sudden hopefulness, "she's so fond of *you*, that seemed a reason for taking her."

"No reason at all, Aunt Ann," observed Margery,

gayly. "I think if Kate ever hated anybody, it is my prospective grandparent, and I am as afraid of her as I can be myself. You should have seen Kate all day, leaning her head beside the window and looking off into space, and acting generally like a deaf mute. Nothing Molly did, that is the maid, seemed to suit; so I had to come to the rescue, and I've been my very sweetest all the way down. If she don't like me now she never will."

"Well, now, Kate," said Aunt Ann, "you're her favorite, and when you know what she —"

Kate made a quick gesture of warning. "How kind of you to give us this room," she interrupted, suddenly. "What a view it must have when the apple trees are in bloom."

"I am coming here to spend every summer of my life if you will let me," added Margery, enthusiastically, going to the open window and letting her happy young eyes rove over the charming afternoon landscape. "Ray is coming next week, Aunt Ann."

"He can't. I haven't a place to put him," said Aunt Ann, desperately.

"Oh, nonsense," said Margery, turning and passing an arm around the other's neck. "What an answer for a dear creature that can't say 'No.'"

"I'm never going to say anything else hereafter," said Aunt Ann, firmly. "I tell you there ain't a room left in the house. Margery, I'm in earnest, and now don't you let him tease me, because you know if he does I shall say, 'Land, yes, you can come just as

well as not,' and there ain't a place unless I turn out and give him my own bed."

Margery laughed, and hugged her. "Then we will find a place in somebody else's house," she answered.

Aunt Ann started. "Don't I hear that Daddy, or whatever his name is?" she exclaimed.

"Dandy?" suggested Margery.

"Yes. He's barking, ain't he? Oh, how will I ever face Kits!"

"I imagine he is a good-natured little thing," suggested Margery, comfortingly. "Mrs. Exton loves him. She talked about him ever so much, coming down."

At tea time that night the two pets collided. The family were at table. Mrs. Exton, to whom the change of scene had apparently already brought benefit, was present. A door leading from the dining-room to a piazza stood open, and it was through this open door that the assembled quartette were able to witness the tragedy. Their attention was first attracted by a portentous hissing and spitting on the part of Kits. They looked up with one accord. There he stood, truly a gigantic cat with his arched back and bristling tail. The very bows of his shining blue ribbon seemed to rise angrily. Opposite him was Dandy, in all the glory of extra wrinkles and moles, the smuttiest of noses and toe nails, the tightest of tails, the daintiest of red collars tinkling with silver bells. Dandy's experience so far in life had led him to be nothing if not confident. With his head on one side, he, in the face of

the paralyzed audience, danced gayly up to Kits, who quick as a flash raised his paw and inflicted a vicious scratch on the soft, black face.

"Ki yi," yelled Dandy, and ran for his life, his tail hanging limp.

"Ha! ha!" hissed Kits, and fled up a *tr  e*. Mrs. Exton and Aunt Ann rose from the table with one accord.

"Madam!" said the former, sternly.

"Madam, yourself!" returned Aunt Ann, her cheeks pink with excitement.

Margery began to laugh irrepressibly.

"Aunt Ann, you must order Kits to apologize to Dandy," suggested Kate, willing to make peace.

"I should like to know why," asked Aunt Ann. "Kits didn't invite any dog to come down here."

"You will please me very much by shutting up your cat in future, Miss Eaton," said Mrs. Exton, swelling with a sense of outrage.

"I shall do nothing of the kind, ma'am," returned Miss Eaton, promptly: "but I will give you the free use of the barn chamber for your dog. 'Tis dogs delight to bark and bite,' and they hadn't ought to be let run loose anyway."

"I am surprised at such a speech from a woman who keeps a wild cat on her place, a great ferocious brute who will attack a gentle creature like Dandy, who never bit anybody."

"Mrs. Exton, I think neither you nor Aunt Ann will have any further trouble with your pets," said Kate.

"Dandy will keep out of Kits' way hereafter, you may be sure."

"If he lives at all," said Mrs. Exton, impressively. "Excuse me, and I will get Molly to search for him."

"I'll hunt him up myself," said Aunt Ann, brusquely, pushing her chair back from the table.

"Excuse me," said Mrs. Exton again, this time stretching out her thin, white hand with a queenly gesture. "After the hatred you have expressed, I should feel safer if you did not touch the poor little creature."

Aunt Ann gave a grunt of impatience. "Well, I'll go get the Pond's Extract bottle. It'll likely be the best thing to rub on."

There was quite a search, in which all finally joined, and Mrs. Exton had gone into hysterics before the pug was found; but finally, up in the orchard behind a fallen tree, he was discovered, a very forlorn and disillusioned little dog, meditating upon the hollowness of the world, and licking his ridiculous face where the deep scratch was still bleeding slightly.

Margery picked him up and carried him to the house, patting him and comforting him all the way, and she received her first kind look from the dog's weeping mistress in return for depositing him in her arms. She stayed and helped apply the Pond's Extract, and Aunt Ann left the house and went out under the tree among whose upper boughs Kits was still in retirement.

x

"Come down, Kits," she said, trying not to speak too kindly.

No movement.

"Kits, Kits, Kits!" she called.

Kits mewed and stirred.

"Come, Kits," she said again; and the cat came daintily stepping down, occasionally mewing.

"Kits, you know how I talked to you about fighting in Boston," she said, lifting him up on her hip and looking into his face as she walked slowly in the dusk toward the house. "That was wicked, downright wicked, and you couldn't see out of your eye for two days. Now was this what you did to-day in self-defence?"

The cat mewed.

"I thought it was. That was all right and well enough; but you must remember that dog is *company*, and you must treat him as well as you can." Aunt Ann put her cheek down on Kits' handsome head. "I think I see myself shutting you up so's to let a dog without any nose overrun the place; a dog rigged up in bells like a fool. No, Kits; I want you should remember your manners as you always have: but if that critter goes to acting around where you are, and bothering, I sha'n't say one word if you scratch him again."

As the cat and dog seemed mutually agreed to shun one another's society, this first household disturbance quieted, and the family settled down to a pleasant routine life, only rippled now and then by Mrs. Exton's

exactions. She described herself as the most easily satisfied of mortals; but, like most ladies of alleged simple tastes, she required an interminable amount of waiting on; and as her maid was sulky and dissatisfied, she claimed much attention and help from the two girls. Margery was willing enough to please her, but her little hands were very full of sewing, and she planned for many a ramble with Kate which Mrs. Exton's exigencies indefinitely postponed. Kate, to do her justice, would ordinarily forego her own wishes with alacrity to serve a sick and elderly friend; but knowing what was in store for her, she was over-sensitive to every demand. This little while, these few weeks were her own. Her first impulse at each fresh request for a song, or a story to be read aloud, was to refuse with desperate energy. The fact is that the friction between her wishes and her actions wore her thin in these days. Margery saw the growing slenderness, and so did Aunt Ann; and the latter in a dim, vague fashion perceived the cause.

"I tell you what, dear," she said one day to Kate, "I've done a good many silly things in my life, but the silliest of all was letting Mrs. Exton come down here. I see it. You'd a started in with her better in the fall if you'd a had a good rest this summer. The woman frets you. I don't believe it's going to work anyhow, Kate, your living with her. It would if you liked her. It would be first-rate; but she's as selfish a piece as I ever came across, and no wonder you can't like her."

"My mind is made up about that, Aunt Ann. I am going to live with her," returned Kate, quietly; "but let me warn you again not to let Margery suspect it. You have frightened me once or twice. It wouldn't do. It would spoil everything."

Aunt Ann paused with her hands in the dish-water and looked at her. They were at the kitchen sink, and Kate was wiping glasses for her. "Kate Standish," she said, slowly, as a mist seemed to roll away from her mental sight, "you're a noble woman."

Kate colored. She looked guilty and anxious. There was nothing she dreaded more than to have Aunt Ann realize the situation. She feared it was just dawning clearly upon her.

"Oh, you promised me, Aunt Ann," she said, desperately.

"I did, my child. I will keep my word. God bless you, Kate," was the earnest answer.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MARGERY SUSPECTS.

Mrs. EXTON, one day when she and Kate had been discussing songs, spoke of one which she said she wished Kate would learn.

"For next winter, you know," she added.

Margery was in the room, and looked up inquiringly.

"Yes," replied Kate, "it might be very useful." Then she spoke of finding a little bell which had dropped from Dandy's collar, and the subject was effectually changed.

There was a pleasant little shady group of trees down by the brook, where the girls sat with their sewing as often as the weather and Mrs. Exton would permit. Kate arrived there one morning in advance of Margery, and settled herself in one of the seats they had contrived. The brook's song was low at this season, but in accord with the soft, rare breezes of mid-summer. Kate was enjoying the peacefulness about her when it was suddenly broken in upon by Margery, who came hurrying into the grove with unusual energy.

"Kate, I want to know right off what secret you have with Mrs. Exton." The speaker's shade hat was on the back of her head, one broad mull "string" in each hand, and her whole effect as she planted herself before her sister, so determined, that Kate's heart sank within her.

"What makes you think that I have a secret?"

"That won't do," returned the other, with an impatient shake of the head. "I have proof. See this. I just picked it up from the grass under Mrs. Exton's window."

Kate took the crumpled paper she offered, and straightened it. She had seen it before. She had written upon it herself: —

Please be more careful in what you say before Margery. Do you remember what you promised me the day that I agreed to your wishes?

Kate glanced over the words, then looked off, as though meditating, then back at Margery, who regained possession of the paper. "Well," she said, "it is nothing I can tell you."

"Kate," said the younger girl, very seriously, "you make it so easy for me to be selfishly happy that I am apt to forget in these days that the world was not made wholly for me. You have let me promise to marry Ray without considering yourself. When he urged a short engagement, and suggested that we be married the first of October, and go to Europe on our wedding trip, you saw that I was dazzled by the thought, and you encouraged me to consent. When-

ever I spoke of your loneliness you hushed me, and suggested a dozen reasons why you would not be lonely or unhappy, and I have always let myself be laughed or petted out of every objection. I ask your pardon, dear, for my selfishness. You would not marry without understanding definitely what was to become of *me*. Very well, I tell you soberly that I must know the whole truth referred to on this paper, or else my wedding is put off indefinitely."

Kate met her eyes imploringly. "If you knew how you trouble me, Margery, you would take back every word of that."

"Not one word," replied the other, shaking her head slowly. "No plan which you hide from me can mean happiness for you."

"But if I tell you, if I assure you, that on the whole it does mean happiness."

"To whom?"

"To me."

Margery smiled. "I should stick to my decision. Put yourself in my place. What would you do?"

Kate pinched up a ruffle into a dozen fine plaits, and was silent.

"Perhaps I have given you cause to say that you love me more than I do you, but you shall never say so again. It isn't true, Kate," added Margery, impulsively. "You were my darling, faithful, devoted sister for ages before I ever saw Ray Ingalls, and if I must choose which of you to make happy it will be you, dear," she finished, fervently, throwing her arm

around Kate, and crying a little on her shoulder. The tears ran down Kate's cheeks unheeded.

"Margery, Margery, what are you saying!" she exclaimed. "It will all be different when Ray is with you again, presenting his side of the case; but I cannot bear to hear you talk so."

"Then I will not talk about it; but it will not be different when Ray comes, unless he can explain this mystery —"

"He promised me."

"Oh, then, he knows? Kate," after a moment's pause, "I feel as if I could not bear it to find out that Ray had been a party to anything—what *can* it be? How unkind you are to keep it from me. I will go straight to Mrs. Exton."

"She will not tell you," replied Kate, growing calm. "Margery, you say you want to make me happy. Then go on with every plan just as we expected. Do you think I cannot take care of myself?"

"That is just what I think," answered Margery, promptly. "Tell me, at least, whether I must be angry with Ray. Has he connived —"

"He has done nothing unkind, nothing that ought to vex you."

"Very well, then, in the course of years I will marry him, when you are married, or settled in some happy way." Margery contracted her eyebrows, and looked meditatively at her sister. "What can you have agreed to that you are not willing to tell me? Not to live with Mrs. Exton, I know; because, rather than to

do that, you would teach until you were seventy, and then go to the Old Ladies' Home, and yet — oh, *what* is it, Kate? Do tell me."

Kate rose. "I am going to the house," she said, slowly and with dignity. "I am seriously hurt that you will not trust me." And, gathering up her work, she moved away, without a look behind her.

Margery stared after her. It was all incomprehensible. She sat there for perhaps ten or fifteen minutes, leaning forward, with her chin resting on her folded hands, and her eyes staring away across the brook, with its bright green banks dotted with clumps of alder and bunches of peppermint, to the woods that stretched away beyond. All at once, as though her bright eyes had conjured it from among the softly rustling trees, appeared the figure of a man.

Margery's heart leaped at sight of him. It was hard to tell why she should feel such glad emotion; for it was not Ray Ingalls, but John Exton, who strode across the brook and up the shallow, grassy incline. He did not see her until she started up and ran toward him.

"Mr. Exton, how glad I am to see you!" she exclaimed.

The new-comer turned in pleased surprise at such vehement cordiality, and shook her offered hand. "I didn't know you had returned from Chicago. Won't you come into my sewing-room, and sit down? Kate and I are awkward carpenters, but I think that seat will hold you."

"Thank you, I will with pleasure. I have been taking what I think the natives must be satirical in terming a short cut from the village." And Mr. Exton seated himself, taking off his hat, and wiping his brow with his handkerchief.

"Yes. Kate and I have taken it," replied Margery, nervously. "It is a lovely walk."

"I remember your sister likes to walk. I think you must be enjoying yourselves here," said Exton, leaning back against a tree trunk, and looking observantly around him.

"It is a lovely old place," answered Margery, impatient to have done with the conventionalities of the occasion; "and we were having a lovely time, — at least, I was, — until this morning."

Exton looked at her anxiously. "Is my mother ill again? She has written me in the best of spirits."

"No, indeed; I think you will find her very comfortable. I was so glad to see you, Mr. Exton, when you came in sight a moment ago," added the girl, after a moment's pause. "I am in such perplexity this morning."

Mr. Exton smiled at her. She seemed unusually youthful to him in her shade hat and simple morning dress. "I fancy you can be helped out of it easily," he said. "I left Ray in a high state of anticipation last evening. He expects to come; possibly, to-morrow."

A flush of pleasure came into the girl's face, and then vanished. "Poor Ray," she sighed. "Mr.

Exton," she continued, gravely, "I know you can help me, and I know you will. I found this paper this morning on the grass beneath your mother's window. Read it, please."

Putting it into his hands, she continued: "You see there is something here that Kate is unwilling I should know; therefore it means something unhappy for her. I have entreated her to tell me about it, and she refuses obstinately. Just think, Ray knows it, whatever it is; she admitted that. What am I to think of *him*?" And there were tears in Margery's eyes as she turned her hands out in a little gesture of despair.

Her companion did not speak. Very stern his face looked as he kept his eyes on the paper, reading the few sentences over and over.

"Oh, here comes Kate back again!" ejaculated Margery, catching sight of a light dress coming swiftly across the green. "Don't let her see it. Come, Kate," she added, speaking aloud and in as bright a tone as she could command, "were you afraid I had drowned myself in the brook? Come, we have a visitor."

Exton slipped the paper into his vest pocket, and rose to meet the new-comer. She put her hand in his, and said a few kind words. For seven long weeks this moment had been the goal toward which he was working; and now those few written words assured him that he had a right to be here. Whatever Kate might think, it was certain that she needed him.

Margery turned away, and sauntered to the brook, to hide her excitement.

"It was hardly right in Margery to waylay you, and keep you from your mother," said Kate, trying to be bright and unembarrassed.

"I was very glad to be waylaid. I had had a long walk through the woods. Here," bringing from an inside pocket of his coat a loosely pinned little paper, "are some violets I found for you as I came along."

"For me?" said Kate, taking them, and coloring with pleasure, much touched and surprised by such a gift from such a person. "You do not know how I love violets."

"Perhaps I do. I have noticed that you wear them very often."

"Yes; so many have been sent me. I have been very fortunate. I remember now that you said you liked them especially."

"I do," said Exton, his hands crossed behind him, as he stood satisfying his hunger for a sight of Kate, who occupied her eyes and fingers with the delicate little flowers. "They are to me the loveliest gift of nature."

There was nothing in this to make Kate sure, for she had never hitherto thought of Mr. Exton as possibly sending the fragrant messages that had come with such regularity; and yet from that moment she was entirely sure that they had come from him, had been the expression of his thought for her. The perception, bewildering in its sweetness, held her powerless to speak or to move. It was very still in the shade where they stood; the brook's cool plash made the

only sound. Kate kept her eyes on the violets, and John Exton kept his eyes on her.

"How much more charming she is in that blue and white stuff than I ever saw her!" he thought, deeply content. "You have grown thin, I think," he said.

"Impossible — during vacation — in the country," she replied, finding suddenly that it was a singularly airless day, and that it was difficult to breathe; "but if it continues so warm as this," she added, turning about suddenly, as if to throw off a spell, "there is no telling what may happen. Do not let us keep you here, Mr. Exton. Your mother must be expecting you."

Exton removed his eyes. He began to suspect from her manner that he might have been staring at her. He looked at her hands, as the next best thing to her face. They were not very long and slender, or otherwise "unutterable patrician," but they were pretty and white. When Nature makes a woman with Kate Standish's type of face, all beauty of form usually accompanies it. He reflected on the selfish use to which it was intended to put her, on the sacrifice that had been required of her, on the unflinching way in which she would be sure to make it.

"No," he answered, with a slight, inscrutable smile. "I am going to surprise my mother. Are you going back to the house, Miss Standish?"

"Not immediately," she replied, moving toward one of the seats.

"Then I will see you again after a time. I am going

to stay to dinner, if Miss Eaton will let me." And, picking up his hat, Exton bowed and left the grove.

Kate did not look after him. She gazed at Margery, who was sitting on the grass by the brook, close to the clump of peppermint, leaves of which she was absently tearing and pinching, so that their breath reached Kate. What wonder that ever after that odor of mint, which to others suggests a prosaic sauce for the table, connected itself for her with ineffable things.

A secret, great, and exultant joy throbbed in all her being. "I have had the happiest moment I shall ever know," she said to herself.

John Exton, as he hurried on up the hill, felt that he had an unenviable task before him. He loved his mother, he felt strongly a sense of duty toward her; and the consciousness of her enfeebled condition brought out the tenderness and chivalry of his nature. He knew what he was to her, — all that she loved after herself. This knowledge had restrained and governed him in times past. It had held him back from the pursuit of happiness, or, in other words, Kate. He had waited and waited, he knew not precisely for what, too really unselfish to claim his own rights at the expense of his mother's peace. Few women could command such love from a son without being more lovely.

The glad change that came over her face on being told of Exton's arrival was proof enough of her fondness for him. She stretched out both hands when he

came into the room, and welcomed him with a warmth that seemed to shame his purpose. He sat down, and answered all her questions; described the parks and drives and lake breezes of Chicago, and congratulated her lovingly on the apparent improvement in her health. At last, he brought the conversation around to the inmates of the house.

"And how do you like our prospective relative, the little Margery?" he asked. "You have had good opportunity to study her."

"My dear boy, I have long given up studying people," replied his mother, indifferently. "I know almost at a glance who will interest me, and who will not. I have no objection to Margery."

"Is that the best you can say for her?"

"It is rather fortunate for her and Ray that I can say that much," was the smiling reply. "It would certainly inconvenience them if I were to say less."

"I have often thought," said Exton, with a quiet persistence, "that your first impulse must have been to object. I know how strenuous your feelings are on this absurdly arbitrary question of caste. I should have said that you would not approve of a marriage between one of our family and one of this."

"My first impulse was certainly to object," said the other, complacently; "but Ray was so earnest I thought better of it."

John Exton was accustomed to his mother's faculty of twisting her own motives; but he had always found some tender excuse for her, on the ground of her

invalidism. He had never felt ashamed for her until now. He knew that she was trying to deceive herself as well as him in this matter; and it hurt him to show her that she had failed in the latter effort.

"Perhaps you thought Miss Standish would be more likely to act as your companion if her sister was disposed of."

"How can I tell now all the thoughts I may have had? However, it is as well you should know that I expect to engage Miss Standish in the fall. I hope it will not be disagreeable for you, John. I think it will not. She is really very sensible."

"It is disagreeable to me to have her coerced."

"Who talks of coercion?"

"This does," and John took the scrap of writing from his pocket. "You must have dropped this from your window. It was on the grass below."

Mrs Exton held up her eye-glass with one unsteady white hand. "Ah, indeed!" she said, as she recognized the written message. "Do you think you had better meddle, John?"

"Yes, mother, I do decidedly. Your ready consent to Ray's wishes was a mystery to me only until I read this. I know how hard it is for you to give up a wish you have once formed. I see now that you did not scruple to work upon this young lady's love for her sister until she consented to what is repugnant to her, for Margery's sake."

"You assume a great deal."

"Oh, it is quite plain. This paper shows Kate to

be in terror lest her sister should discover this plan, because she knows that rather than consent to it, Margery would give up her marriage."

"Do you mean to say that you believe such rubbish as that?"

"Fully. I know it. Mother, have I ever thwarted you in any way before?"

No answer.

"Well, I must in this. I cannot allow Miss Standish to put us under any such obligation as to come into our house to be at your or any one's beck and call."

"Indeed!" Mrs. Exton's dim eyes flashed, and she seemed suddenly alert and in full possession of her strength. "How can you prevent it?"

"By laying the whole arrangement before Miss Margery." He started up, catching sight of some one from the window. "She is coming into the house now. May I call her up here?"

Mrs. Exton waved her hand in haughty consent, and in another minute Margery was in the room, her hat in her hand, looking from mother to son with an excited expectancy.

John brought forward a chair for her.

"I would rather stand, please," she said, resting her hand on its back. "How angry and hard that woman can look!" she said to herself.

"Miss Margery, I wish you to understand some matters relative to your engagement which, I believe, Ray has withheld from you, probably at your sister's

request. My mother governs Ray's fortune for a few years to come. It is not large, and it is so disposed that he receives but a small income from it at present. My mother consented to Ray's marriage on the condition that your sister would thereafter make her home with her. Your sister consented to the condition, and so matters stand at present. This, I believe, is news to you."

Margery's face flushed slowly, deeply. Mrs. Exton watched her with a most disagreeable expression of criticism.

"Very sad news, Mr. Exton," replied the girl. "It means a great deal to me. Why have you not told me this?" she added, turning suddenly to Mrs. Exton.

The latter used her smelling-bottle. "It was nothing to me whether you were told or not," she said. "You must remember you were nothing to me at the time, not even an acquaintance. If you are minded to turn this very commonplace arrangement into a tragedy, please do so outside of this room. I hope you are satisfied, John."

"I shall be when I know what Miss Margery says to it."

Margery looked at him, her breast rising and falling. "Can you doubt, Mr. Exton?" she said. "Thank you so much for your great kindness," she added, earnestly, coming forward and taking his hand in both of hers. "No one else would have told me I should have been allowed to go on. No one seems to care for Kate but me."

"And you care for her more than you do for Ray," remarked Mrs. Exton. "I am glad we found that out in time. His own people love him."

Margery turned her clear young eyes on the speaker with a kind of curiosity as though she had never seen her before. Then she released John, and left the room without another word. She hurried out of the house and ran across the lawn. Kate was still sitting in the grove, pretending to sew.

Margery suddenly appeared before her, pushed her work away, took her in her arms and kissed her.

"I understand it all now, dear," she said, rather breathlessly, but without tears. "Mr. Exton has found out and told me. It was just like you."

Kate looked at her helplessly, all her vague, sweet happiness put to flight. "What shall I do with you, Margery?" she said, her hands falling nerveless in her lap.

"Love me," answered Margery, resting her own cheek tenderly against hers.

"And Ray? Will he wait?"

Margery smiled with a look of utter confidence. "Ray must have been misled," she said. "If he could not be a true brother to you, Kate, he could never be a husband to me."

CHAPTER XXVII.

AT MRS. PARKER'S.

WHEN the girls returned to the house, Mr. Exton had gone. Mrs. Exton had her dinner brought up to her room; and as Aunt Ann and her nieces had not often the pleasure of a meal together without her, it ought to have been a hilarious occasion. Aunt Ann sat down to the table making the announcement cheerfully that the old lady was indisposed.

"I tried to make Mr. Exton wait," she said, "but he said no. It seems he's made arrangements to stay at Parker's, in the village, and there's a room there that Ray can have. He said he'd probably come back to-morrow. It's my opinion," lowering her voice, "that he and his ma have had some sort of a tiff."

"It seems that Mrs. Exton cannot be agreeable long, even to him," observed Margery. "She would be a nice individual for Kate to live with, don't you think, Aunt Ann? A nice person to have the disposal of Kate's time and actions!"

"Land!" ejaculated Miss Eaton, looking from Margery to Kate.

"Well, I am glad that at least *you* did not know it. I am glad some one beside myself has a spark of feeling for Kate."

Aunt Ann made a sudden plunge at the beefsteak, and covered her guilty consciousness by using the carving knife and fork energetically. She stole furtive glances at Kate, who sat mute and resistless. Margery had evidently, by some means or other, deposed her and taken possession of the reins. She chattered cheerily on all subjects, and hoped that to-morrow would prove pleasant, for Ray's sake. Apparently her light-heartedness was real, but it elicited nothing but an occasional smile from Kate, and timid monosyllables from Aunt Ann, who had not yet decided whether to be glad or sorry that, as she expressed it to herself, the fat was in the fire.

The next day Margery went about the house singing like a bird. Mrs. Exton came feebly out to the piazza, and Margery, who happened to be in sight, pulled forward a chair for her, but turned away, still humming her little song and not acknowledging her presence in any other way.

Ray was coming. She would see him to-day. They had been separated two weeks. Every wish of hers he would sympathize with; he would understand her every feeling, as he always had done; he would answer her questions and explain all that now looked mysterious in his past behavior regarding Kate.

She expected him to arrive by the train that brought Mr. Exton yesterday, but the hour passed and he did

not come, and, with a keen disappointment, Margery settled down to wait until to-morrow.

Early in the afternoon a horse and buggy were driven swiftly up to the house, and Mr. Exton alighted. It was the hour in a summer day when the hearts of womankind turn naturally to dressing-sacks, darkened windows, and naps. The house looked singularly quiet, and no answer came at once to his loud knocking, save Dandy's industrious barking. At last Margery appeared with the pug at her heels, his jingling bells and sharp little voice mingling with her welcome of the new-comer.

"Ray did not arrive," she said, eagerly, as though she thought perhaps Exton had brought some word.

The latter stooped to pat the dog, an unusual condescension, which evidently surprised Dandy to the extent of extinguishing his bark.

"I do not see how your mother gets any naps, really," laughed Margery; "but she is always patient with Dandy's noise. Shall I see if you can come right up stairs?"

"You need not disturb her, please," rejoined the other, rather hurriedly.

Margery hesitated. Was she to usher Mr. Exton into Aunt Ann's darkened parlor, and treat him like a caller?

"It is not very lively at Mrs. Parker's, where I am stopping," he continued, explanatorily; and Margery thought his kind, deliberate way of speaking even pleasanter than usual. "I am hoping to get a little

fishing later, and meanwhile the thought of you all attracted me."

"I am glad," said Margery, frankly. "If you are going to stay in town I hope you will come often. I feel," she added, turning her rosy face up to his with a charming air of frankness, "very much nearer—I mean better acquainted with you since yesterday."

"I am glad of that," he returned, earnestly. "Margery,—may I call you Margery?" He paused.

"Yes, indeed," and the girl gave him her hand, with an instinctive feeling that he wished it.

"I wish you to feel near to me, and to feel sure that I am as anxious for your happiness as I am for Ray's. Remember I am going to be your uncle one of these days, and you must feel a real niece's privilege to express your wishes to me, being certain of my sympathy. Will you promise to adopt me at once?"

"It will be a long time yet," said Margery, softly; "but I appreciate your kindness. Your sense of justice toward Kate I shall never forget; and I am sure if I were to be in any perplexity from which Ray could not relieve me, you would be my first thought."

"Do not forget, then," said Exton, gravely; and at the same moment he perceived Kate standing a little way back in the entry, and looking astonished at the tableau formed by Margery with her hand in John Exton's.

The latter released Margery and came inside. "How do you do, Miss Standish? I came to see if you had

the bravery to go for a drive so early on a summer afternoon."

Kate looked keenly at Margery. She could not imagine why Mr. Exton should have been holding her hand and speaking so devotedly.

"Certainly," she answered. "I will be ready in a minute."

She hurried up stairs and soon returned, ready, with her hat and parasol. Margery stood on the piazza and watched them drive off. The last they saw of her she was holding Dandy up in her arms, making him wave his paw after them, and laughing at his little, wrinkled, careworn face.

"I wish she might never know a less happy moment than the present one," said Exton.

"Thank you in her name. It seems that I am fated after all to be a stumbling-block in the poor child's path," said Kate.

"I wish there were none more serious," returned Exton, gravely. They had gained the public road, and instead of driving, as Kate had expected, farther back into the country, he had turned the horse's head toward the village. "We are companions to-day in a heavy trial, Miss Standish. Ray came down last night on the train; there was an accident, and he was among the injured. The collision occurred not far from the town here, and I hurried to the spot as soon as the news came, and found the poor boy, and brought him to the house where I am stopping. I am going to take you there now if you are willing."

"Of course I am willing," said Kate, very pale. "How much is he injured?"

"His left arm is broken, and there is a cut on his head, from which he is unconscious. The arm has been set, and I have telegraphed to Boston for Dr. D——," naming a famous surgeon; "and until he arrives I shall not feel sure that we know the extent of the injury."

"Oh, what a blessing that Aunt Ann lives so out of the way! No one has been to the farm this morning who could bring the news."

"Yes, I saw that as soon as Margery met me. I thought it better to talk with you, and, perhaps, have you see Ray before the dear little girl should be told."

"Oh, Mr. Exton, you don't think there is any danger!"

"What can I say, Miss Standish? I hope not, more than I ever hoped for anything."

Dreadful visions passed through Kate's head of Margery, pale, dressed in black, a crushed, broken-hearted creature.

"It is too dreadful. What does the doctor say?"

"I left him with Ray. He promised to stay until I returned. He has been very kind; but he is evidently glad I have sent for Dr. D——."

"If we could only keep it from Margery," said Kate, "until we could give a hopeful account of him."

"You shall decide that, and everything," replied Exton. "I cannot tell you with what a rush of gratitude I realized your nearness this morning."

"That is a pleasant thing to hear," said Kate. "I have been feeling so superfluous of late, and at best a bone of contention."

Exton looked at her with an unmistakable expression, which surprised her even more than the discovery about the violets. Her pulses beat, and she grew warm beneath it; but her intellect was not to be misled by her heart. Just because she found herself with him in this simple, unconventional spot, she was not going to forget who John Exton was, and what were his associates, life, and expectations. Kate always wanted everything clearly explained, and, as she had not naturally doubts of her own judgment, her own explanations were apt to satisfy her. She had one nicely fitted in a twinkling to John Exton's newly discovered interest in herself. He was one of those confirmed bachelors, with nevertheless warm hearts, who delight to give pleasure to youth, who take a generous, kindly interest in those unfavored by fortune. She had read of such people. It was natural for any humane person well acquainted with Mrs. Exton to try to save a young woman with other means of support from becoming her companion. It was natural for this type of humane person to send flowers anonymously to a poverty-stricken girl who otherwise would not have any. It was natural for him now to look at her with an appreciation of her position that called forth his kindest pity. It was not his fault if the pity was so near akin to love that she could not tell them apart.

"Here we are," said Exton, turning to the side of the street, and stopping before a white house with green blinds, that stood close to a sidewalk, shaded by a row of maples. Two stone steps led to the front door. Exton opened it without stopping to knock, and Kate followed him to a darkened back room, evidently selected for its quiet, where there was a bed, and on it a figure with restless head turning from side to side, and talking incoherently.

The doctor rose and came forward. "Perhaps it will be as well for no one but yourself to come in, Mr. Exton," he said. "I will go out and try to find a nurse. I have left written directions there that will answer until Dr. D—— arrives."

Kate clung unconsciously to Exton's arm. "He is calling Margery, do you hear?" she whispered. "I need not go in?"

"No," said Exton, pressing her hand to his side. "I told you, Dr. Oakley, that the young lady whom Mr. Ingalls is to marry is here in the village."

Dr. Oakley bowed gravely to Kate.

"This is her sister. Miss Standish, this is Dr. Oakley. We were wondering whether it would be best to keep Mr. Ingalls' condition a secret from the young lady until he improves."

"If you ask my advice I should say not. In my opinion the young man's condition is critical," replied the doctor, promptly.

"I wish he might be moved to our house," said Kate, trembling.

"Miss Eaton's? Impossible for some time to come, at best. He has already been moved to a dangerous extent."

"I must take this young lady home," said Exton. "I thought if Ray were still in a stupor she might see him. I wonder if it would be safe to leave Mrs. Parker with Ray?"

"One can do about as much for him as another, just now," said the doctor. "However, if you will let me take your buggy, I will drive home with Miss Standish. The woman I hope to secure as a nurse lives just beyond Miss Eaton."

So it was arranged. Kate gave her hand to Exton and turned away with a sinking heart. The drive home seemed cruelly short to her. How would Margery bear it! How terrible it was to be so helpless to comfort her!

It was a little relief to find when she arrived at the farm that the news of the collision had penetrated there. Margery was walking up and down in the shade beside the house, and, as soon as she saw the approaching buggy, ran to meet it. She started at sight of a strange man in Mr. Exton's place.

"Have you heard of the railroad accident, Kate?" she demanded. "I am so frightened about Ray. It was the train he expected to come on." She looked searchingly in her sister's face. "He did come on it Oh, Kate, Kate!"

The doctor leaped from the buggy and supported

her. "I hope for the best, my dear young lady," he said, tritely.

"Is he alive, then?" asked Margery, resisting the overpowering faintness.

"Yes, darling," said Kate, tremulously. "This is the doctor who is taking care of him. Take the reins, doctor, please. Let me come to her."

"Will you get my hat for me, Kate? I am too weak to hurry."

"What for, dear?"

"Why, to go back with the doctor, of course; but perhaps they are bringing him here."

"No, it was not best," replied Kate. "He is with Mr. Exton at Mrs. Parker's. The doctor is on his way to get a nurse, Margery; you must not detain him."

"Oh, doctor, I could take care of him!" said Margery, pathetically. "You won't believe me because I am so young; but I could, indeed."

"My dear child, it might be risking his life. We cannot be too careful."

"Then, hurry," said Margery, feverishly, "hurry."

The doctor jumped into the buggy and drove off; and Kate put her arm around her sister and led her toward the house.

"Tell me all about it, Kate; everything you know." Kate obeyed, lovingly softening every discouraging detail.

"Ah! he called me, did he?" asked Margery, with a joyful brightening of her face. "Perhaps he was

more sensible than you thought. At all events, I shall very soon know," she added, hastening her footsteps.

Mrs. Exton's and Aunt Ann's consternation at the news was equal, but differently expressed. The former fainted dead away, and was recovered, through Molly's long-continued efforts, only to cry plaintively for John. Aunt Ann's cheeks became very red, sure sign with her of great fatigue or strong emotion, and she assumed a cheerfulness as strained and unnatural as her color.

"Now, if we could only have the dear boy right here, Margery," she said, "we could have real comfort nursing him up."

"You have the horse harnessed and we will go to him directly," replied the girl. "I have very little to do to get ready. Hurry, please, Aunt Ann."

"Wait till to-morrow morning. Wouldn't it be better?" suggested Kate, but very hesitatingly; for the doctor's forebodings had been so frightful to her inexperience that she did not feel sure that to-morrow would not be too late.

"I am surprised at you, Kate," said her sister; then turning to Aunt Ann: "Is it perfectly convenient about the horse? If not, say so; for I do not mind the walk."

"Yes, it's convenient," said Aunt Ann. "We'll go, Margery."

Twenty minutes later they were on their way. Hardly a word passed between them until they

reached their destination. "Perhaps they won't let us see him at all, dear," said Aunt Ann, kindly, just before they went in. "You love him enough to do whatever's best for him, Margery."

Aunt Ann's words were more sanguine than her feelings. She was trembling with dread of the effect upon Margery of seeing Ray. She made her sit down in the parlor until Mrs. Parker had summoned Exton, who came very promptly. He was struck at once with the great change in Margery from the laughing girl of a couple of hours ago. She rose as he entered the room, and came to meet him.

"Has the nurse arrived?" she asked.

"Yes, she has just come."

"How soon will Dr. D—— be here?"

"In about an hour."

"Is Ray conscious?"

"He is delirious nearly all the time; but there are moments when a sensible look comes into his eyes, and that makes me hopeful."

"Can I see him now?"

Exton looked at her in admiring surprise. She was so quiet. Poor Margery! She knew that composure would be her only passport into the sick-room.

"Will you not wait until Dr. D—— comes?" he asked, gently.

Margery began to tremble violently. "Do not keep me out; I must see him," she said, softly, clasping her hands. You can tell in a moment if my presence has a bad effect, and I will leave him immediately."

Aunt Aunt looked helplessly from one to the other.

"Mr. Exton, you mean to be kind ; but can you not understand what it is to me to be wasting these minutes?" Margery took hold of Exton's hand as she spoke, and the intense pleading in her blue eyes was not to be withstood.

"Come," he said. "Miss Eaton, will you wait here?"

Aunt Ann bowed her head in silence.

Margery followed him to the door of the sick-room. They could hear Ray's rambling, broken talk. She felt as if her heart would burst to hear the beloved voice. Exton opened the door and she walked in. The nurse was sitting there. She looked up in surprise at the apparition of the pale, pretty girl, who crossed the room noiselessly, sank on her knees beside the bed, took the patient's right hand, and looked steadily into his eyes. Ray's expression changed. He looked at her curiously.

"Margery," he said, and then was still.

Margery, without looking up, lifted her other hand to Exton, who stood beside her. He pressed it, and then took his seat at a little distance. Minutes passed. Ray remained quiet, with his eyes closed, and his hand in Margery's. Exton brought a little chair, and tried to induce her to change her position ; but she shook her head.

At last he left the room. Margery knew he had gone to meet the doctor. A few minutes after his departure, the nurse, who was a stout woman, in

attire guiltless of whalebone, came heavily to the bedside.

"It is time for his medicine," she whispered, huskily.

"But I think he is asleep," replied Margery.

The nurse shook her head peremptorily. "Stupor. He's more dangerous when he's this way. He's got to have his medicine. Move, please."

The patient stirred restlessly as the spoon was put between his lips, and Margery was obliged to release his hand. He began to talk again incoherently, growing louder and louder, and more excited, until she was terrified. The nurse kept her station jealously beside the bed, waving a palm-leaf fan back and forth. After what seemed to Margery an age of waiting, the door opened, and Mr. Exton and the famous surgeon walked in.

A sob rose in Margery's throat. She cast one glance toward the bed, and went quietly out of the room. She found Aunt Ann where she had left her in the parlor. Mrs. Parker was sitting with her, and Aunt Ann introduced her niece. Margery shook hands with the hostess very cordially, and spoke so warmly of the latter's share of the trouble that had come to them, that the good woman's heart was won. Artful Margery! She had designs upon Mrs. Parker's hospitality.

"How did you find him?" asked Aunt Ann, eagerly, deceived by the excitement in Margery's manner.

"The doctor has just come, you know," replied the girl. "We shall hear his verdict soon, I hope; and after that, Aunt Ann, don't wait any longer for me."

"But you're coming home, child."

"I cannot possibly go. Mrs. Parker will give me some little place where I can sleep. If I stay with Ray, I think he will live. If I leave him, I am sure he will die."

"She'll have to stay, I guess, Miss Eaton, if she feels that way," said Mrs. Parker, indulgently, with a furtive wink at Aunt Ann. "She can come home in a day or two, you know, when the young man's better."

"Well, I declare," said Aunt Ann, wiping her eyes, "I don't know what to do. Poor, dear Ray. My poor boy."

Here Mr. Exton appeared. All three women started to their feet at sight of his grave face. "Dr. D—— wants you, Margery," he said, hastily. Margery went with him without a word.

"Ray is so excited. I spoke of you to the doctor, and he wishes to try your effect upon him again. Do just what you did before, as nearly as you can."

Margery went in, and kneeling by the bedside again took the restless hand, and met the roving eyes with a loving little smile, infinitely sad and sweet.

Ray rested his eyes upon her, talked more slowly, and at last grew still.

The doctor's face relaxed. "Invaluable," he said to Exton.

He sent the nurse from the room on some errand.

Margery looked at him with a significance which made him stoop to her side.

"That woman must go away. She does harm," she

said, distinctly. "I am strong, and will do in her place. Tell them."

The doctor stood up. "She knows enough not to whisper," he thought. "Any way, we can make the trial."

He beckoned Exton out of the room. "That nurse won't do. I thought so, and the young lady says so. She must go. I shall know to-morrow more than I do now about this case. After that it will be time to send to Boston for a nurse if there is necessity for one."

The sinister closing of the doctor's sentence gave Exton the keenest pang of apprehension he had yet experienced. From that moment Margery was queen in the sick-room. The nurse was dismissed with a mollifying bank-note; and the tenderest and wisest care watched over Ray through the long night. Margery refused to leave him for a moment; and, indeed, when the doctor saw the effect upon the patient of missing her from his side, she was no longer urged to rest.

Toward morning Ray fell into a troubled sleep, a sign which Margery, eagerly watching the doctor's face, could see was hopeful. Upon awaking, Ray looked quite tranquilly at Margery, and spoke her name; and, as the day wore on, these lucid periods grew longer. During one of the short naps into which he frequently fell, Margery drew the doctor outside the room.

"You feel quite easy now about him, doctor?" she asked, eagerly.

"If he gets well, my dear young lady, you shall be the doctor who gets the credit," was the reply, as the speaker looked into the large blue eyes, with their dark circles. "I do feel hopeful; but I do not think at best that there can be a quick recovery for our patient. We must make up our minds for a siege."

"We should be grateful to do that, with victory at the end," she replied, bravely, and went back to Ray's side. The next time he woke, he put his hand out toward hers. It was the first sensible motion he had made. It was evident that for the time he knew her perfectly, and realized her care for him.

"He will get well," thought Margery, with a thrill of joy; "but I must be with him night and day." She was fully imbued with the idea that his life depended upon her proximity.

The next time she left the room she met Exton in the hall.

"I am glad you have been out breathing the air," she said; for he looked full of vitality.

"I had to go to my mother. She had heard that Dr. D—— was here, and she insisted upon seeing him. I knew he must not leave Ray to-day, so I rode up to the farm, and pacified her as well as I could. She is very much broken by all this agitation. Have you needed me? I hurried as fast as I was able."

"No; Ray has been asleep much of the time. The doctor and I have both been with him."

"I have a note for you from your sister," said Exton, taking it from his pocket; "and they all sent love. Won't you go outdoors for a few minutes, and let me take your place?"

"No, not yet, thank you; I am nowhere near tired out. That is my one talent — health." She smiled at Exton, and paused. "I am going to take advantage of what you said the day Ray was hurt," she continued, finally. "It seems about a month ago. Do you remember you said I must come to you with all my wishes, certain of your sympathy?"

"Yes, dear little niece. I meant it then, and I mean it a hundredfold more since I have had a glimpse of your strong, sweet character."

"Well," said Margery, coming closer to him, and looking up with a childlike appeal, "do you think in a few days, if Ray gets better, gets to know me for, say, an hour at a time, do you think it would do him any harm if I were to marry him?"

The proposition surprised Exton so completely that for a minute he did not answer.

"Then," continued Margery, "no one could make any objection to anything, and they could not insist upon sending to Boston for another nurse."

"We cannot let you ruin your health."

"No; I would promise to be sensible."

Exton looked at her. Where were the various considerations that had looked so weighty a week ago, — Kate's future, Mrs. Exton's consent, Ray's temporary poverty? All swallowed up in this one absorbing be-

lief that she was necessary to her lover's renewed health. A belief that Exton could not help sharing with almost superstitious earnestness.

"You have cut the Gordian knot, Margery," he said. "I should not be surprised if your loving intuition had selected the quickest, surest means to Ray's recovery."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MRS. EXTON IS SHOCKED.

It was at this troublesome time that Aunt Ann more than ever regretted her acceptance of Mrs. Exton as a summer boarder. It would have been sad enough at the farm without the perpetual annoyance of her complaints; and perhaps the counter-irritation she inflicted was not wholly undesirable for her hostess and Kate. The latter was in a strange state. She wondered at herself for feeling anything but grief; but her unrest, her anxiety, her very sadness for Margery were tempered by a nameless, unreasonable joy, that stole into her heart whenever the pressure of care lifted ever so slightly. Of course, this subtle happiness must have an explanation.

"It astonishes me to find how relieved I am that I am not going to be Mrs. Exton's companion," she said to Aunt Ann, and so saying explained it to her own satisfaction.

"My dear, it shames me to think of setting up our little troubles at a time like this," responded her aunt; "but upon my word that woman's peevishness beats all. It frets her most to death, I do believe, to think

there's somebody in town sicker'n she is, even though it's her own flesh and blood. There's that dear boy not out of danger yet; and still she can think of herself more than him, and be jealous of him because he keeps John down there. Oh," sighing heavily, "I do hope Mr. Exton'll come up and tussle with her to-day. It always quiets her down for a while, any way."

"Perhaps I had better go and read to her," suggested Kate. "I dare say it would be as good for me as for her. It is such a strange experience to be separated from Margery, and know her to be undergoing such fatigue and anxiety, and yet not be permitted to help her. Anything that will kill time and divert my mind is a blessing."

"Well, now, don't worry, dear. It is all in the Lord's hands. *Realize* that, don't simply *say* it, and it will do you a world of good. Mr. Exton says, you know, that Margery is keeping up wonderfully, and that they don't dare to spare her, she seems to do Ray so much good. Well, then, she's in the way of her duty, and she'll be supported. I'm tempted to fret over it a good deal myself; but I can't leave home just now, and probably they wouldn't have me there if I could go. So my duty is plain enough." And Aunt Ann gave Kate an encouraging little pat on the shoulder, as she passed her to go into the china closet.

"Well," said Kate, "I will go to Mrs. Exton."

"I will say for you that your patience with her is sweet," said Aunt Ann.

Kate blushed. "Only since I have known that she had no claim upon me."

She took a book, and went up stairs to Mrs. Exton's room.

"I am glad you have finally decided to come," was her welcome. "No one seems to consider what it is to me to sit here alone with my horrible apprehensions about Ray. Even Molly has been gone a preposterous length of time, and I have no bell to call any one."

"It is growing warm up here," answered Kate. "Don't you think you might get down to the piazza? I have found a story that I am sure you will like."

"Oh, of course, if it is too warm for you to sit here, I could not ask you to do so."

"It is not so uncomfortable for me as it will be for you in your weak condition. Let me help you down."

"My son ought to be here," was the fretful reply. "I fully expected to have the pleasure and comfort of his society during his vacation."

"Surely none of us expected the present sad state of affairs," replied Kate, assisting the old lady to rise.

With some difficulty she helped her down to the piazza, and seated her in a rocking-chair. The girl had such a firm, deft way with her, and was so strong withal, Mrs. Exton breathed a sigh when she found herself comfortably ensconced, a sigh for the vanished prospect of Kate's steady companionship. Her pride kept her from putting her thoughts into words. She now felt a real dislike for Margery, and would have preferred to scorn Kate; but the latter still exercised,

as she had from the evening of their first meeting, a fascination over the old lady which made the latter eager, in spite of herself, for the charm of her presence.

Kate opened the book, and began reading; but before long Mrs. Exton interrupted her.

"Excuse me. Who is that turning into the drive? Is it my son?"

"Yes, oh, yes; it is!" exclaimed Kate, joyfully. "Now we shall hear the news."

She would have left her chair but for the jealousy of her companion, who she knew would be highly displeased should she receive the first of Mr. Exton's communication. Mrs. Exton watched his approach with an unsmiling expression of long suffering. He tied his horse in the shade, then came swiftly across the lawn and up the steps.

"How do you do to-day, mother?" he asked, kissing her; then he shook hands with Kate, and seated himself on the step close by his mother's feet.

"I think you must know how I would feel under these circumstances," replied the latter, severely. "How is Ray?"

"On the whole, improving; but he requires constant watching and care."

"That may be," said Mrs. Exton; "but of how many people? I should think, John, that you might occasionally recollect my needs."

"That is what I am doing now. Be sure my inclination is to be up here in this breezy spot all the time,

and, by the way, how well it is agreeing with you! In spite of all that has occurred, you are looking very well."

Mrs. Exton glared at him in amazement, and then smiled a smile of contempt for masculine penetration.

"I could have told you, Miss Standish, that if I dragged myself out here upon the piazza I should immediately be pronounced well," she said.

"I wish pronouncing you so would make you well," said Kate, pacifically. "Margery must be keeping up, Mr. Exton, or you would have told me at once."

"She is doing nobly. If you could hear the things Dr. D—— says about her, you would be proud of her."

"It is quite time she came back here," said Mrs. Exton, irritably. "Of course Ray likes to have her there; he would not have any judgment about it; but so long as immediate danger is past, I consider that her remaining with him is not only unnecessary, but positively indelicate. No *lady* would —"

"Mother!" exclaimed Exton, stopping her with a look such as she had never received from him before. "Not another word of that sort."

Mrs. Exton turned sharply to Kate. "Perhaps you had better leave us, Miss Standish, if your presence causes my son so far to forget himself as to dictate to his mother."

"Pray remain where you are," ordered John, his brows knitted in a stern look, in which Kate exulted despite the fact of its falling upon her. The humane

confirmed bachelor would be a staunch protector and friend to Margery. She could see that. "I consider Margery as already my niece. I will not hear one criticism of her sweet, womanly behavior," he finished.

"Well!" ejaculated Mrs. Exton, her delicate face deeply red.

"Since Margery's position strikes you, mother, as anomalous, I think it should be altered." He turned to Kate with a gentle change of manner. "She could not be induced to leave Ray, I am sure, and I agree with her in believing her presence to be a great advantage to him. It would obviate every difficulty if they could be married now in a day or two."

"John Exton!" exclaimed his mother, "are you crazy? I will not give my consent," she finished, her voice trembling with anger.

"Why not now as well as any time?"

"I have no intention of ever giving it. I do not like the match. It is a misalliance, undesirable in every way. It shall not be while I have breath to oppose it."

Kate was terribly pale, and her eyes filled with tears. They gave Exton a wild pang.

"Mother, you destroy my faith in you. No one but yourself could have made me believe that you would say such words before Margery's sister. Your consent to this marriage is of the smallest importance. All my support, affectionate and financial, is at the service of these young people, who, unless Ray is worse, will certainly be married before two days are over."

"Does Margery wish it?" asked Kate, brokenly.

Exton bowed. "It is her dearest wish," he said.

"It was her suggestion!" flashed into Kate's mind, and again her heart grew warm toward John Exton. Toward his impotent, selfish mother, she could feel only pity. The poor woman, belittled and defeated, had burst into tears—tears of the bitterest mortification.

John leaned over her and she did not repulse him. Dearer than all the world beside, she could not afford to lose his love.

"How can you ever forgive yourself, John?" she sobbed.

He put his arm around her. "I could forgive you more easily, mother, if you would apologize to Miss Standish," he said, firmly. "You must have forgotten her presence when you spoke a minute ago. Say so; do not let her think so badly of us."

"Miss Standish is not so unreasonable as you are. She does not expect an unhappy, lonely, sick woman to be always thinking of conventionalities."

"I expect my mother to let me look up to her," said John, gently persistent. "Miss Standish," he turned to where Kate had been sitting, but no one was there.

"It is too late," he added, briefly; "she has gone."

"I should think it was time," was the pettish reply. "She should have left me as soon as you came. Then she would have heard nothing disagreeable."

Exton straightened himself with a sigh of exasperation. "Well," he said, "when you wish me to feel

toward you as I always have done, you can make that apology."

"So you make conditions with me!" exclaimed the other, in pitiful astonishment. "It has come to this! Ah, I am thankful that poor Irene died before this day. Her boy married to a penniless girl of no family. Her mother set at naught and humbled before a young working-woman! Oh, John! what has changed you so terribly? What has come between us?"

"I hope I may tell you some time, mother. If I do it will mean my lifelong happiness."

"Why, this is the worst of all!" exclaimed the other. "Your lifelong happiness! What can you mean?"

Exton replied, without meeting her eyes, full of apprehensive amazement, "I have not the answer yet to give you."

"But it sounds as though you wanted to be married, John."

"I do."

Mrs. Exton started. She ran over in her mind every eligible woman of her acquaintance. It is needless to say that Kate did not enter into her calculations. She was completely taken by surprise and doubly appalled at the thought of losing her son's confidence at such a critical time.

"What should hinder you, then, my dear?" she asked, tremblingly. "You do not hesitate on my account, I hope. My greatest wish, now that I have not long to live, is to be assured of your happiness."

Her plaintive tone, her weakness, the reference to

her death—the latter a very rare thing with her—touched him.

“Thank you, mother. I have not much hope that you will approve my choice.”

“Your taste could not err,” she answered, proudly.

“And I have very little hope—no reasonable hope at all—that I shall be successful.”

Mrs. Exton threw back her head in a significant gesture.

“But she is the only woman I will ever marry. If I may not have her, there will never be anybody else.”

His mother looked at him fondly. “Happy woman, whoever she is,” she thought; “beautiful, rich, bearing an honored name, how blessed she will be when she finds that John Exton loves her,” she sighed. She had been deeply incensed with her son a short time ago, but this wonderful confidence extinguished every trace of hard feeling.

Aunt Ann and Kate came into sight on the lawn, and passed down toward the old-fashioned well and stood there talking.

“Which do you want me to please when I marry, mother, myself or you?”

“That implies a very harsh criticism of me, dear,” she answered, gently. “I do not think I deserve it. This strange marriage that you wish to bring about for Ray offends my taste, of course, and I see that you are determined to make me of no account in the matter. Very well; I can bear it. I can bear anything with comparative indifference that does not have directly to

do with you, my son. Your personal movements are my great, my only interest in life. It gratifies me unspeakably that you should have confided in me, John. Do you think I am doubtful of your choice? Not at all. The woman you love is beautiful, at least in your eyes?"

"She is."

"She has position?"

"No; she is poor."

"That is of little consequence; you are rich."

"I shall be if I win her."

"She is a woman we shall be proud of under any and all circumstances?"

"Yes." Exton thought a moment gravely; then he continued, "I believe it will be best to confide in you further, to make a test of your love."

Mrs. Exton bowed her head.

"The woman I wish to marry is not far away. That is she standing over there with her hand on the well-sweep."

Mrs. Exton looked slowly in the direction indicated, and a stony change came over her face.

"Do you mean Kate Standish?" she asked.

"Yes."

A dry sob rose in her throat. She recalled slowly and painfully all he had said. She felt the absolute hopelessness of protest.

"My son, you have broken my heart!" she answered.

Exton put his hand upon the arm of her chair. "No," he said; "there is nothing in that news to break

your heart. Would she be any less charming as a daughter than as a companion? What attribute does she lack that you desire in my wife? Remember, the only hope I have is born of my own wishes. She has not given me a shadow of reason for it."

Mrs. Exton sat as one stunned.

"Be kind to her, mother, for both our sakes. I rely upon your affection."

Still she did not speak.

"I must be going," he said at last. "I promised Margery not to stay long. There are some sad scenes down in that house. Well," he paused, looked into the white, immobile face, and drew a long breath as he stepped down upon the grass, "I will try to see you every day."

She let him go in silence. He mounted his horse, and, riding slowly across the lawn, drew rein beside Aunt Ann and Kate, who turned grave faces toward him. He saw that Kate had been crying.

"Margery asked me to give you her best love, Miss Kate, and to ask you and Miss Eaton to come down to Mrs. Parker's to-morrow morning. If Ray seems able they will be married then. If not, it will be on the next day."

"Does the doctor feel safe about him now?" asked Aunt Ann.

"I think he does; but Margery is the bravest of us all. Her faith does not waver. I hope you approve of her course, Miss Kate?"

"Yes," replied the girl. "If Ray lives, it is better

that Margery should be married to him. If he should die, it would be a comfort to her to bear his name. I meant to have written a note to send her by you, but the right words would not come." Kate's eyes filled again.

"But I may say you will come to-morrow?"

"Oh, yes," replied Aunt Ann for her, "we will come to-morrow." Exton lifted his hat and rode away. Kate wiped her eyes and went back to Mrs. Exton. The best panacea for her trouble would be to feel herself of use. She stepped up on the piazza.

"Shall we go on with our story, Mrs. Exton?" she asked, pleasantly.

The invalid was sitting in an unusually erect posture. Her face looked firm although very pale.

"No, I thank you," she answered, clearly. Kate was struck by the indefinable change in her voice and manner. "I have had a bright thought since you left me. I received a letter from my sister last night. She is something of an invalid and spends her time largely at resorts, both summer and winter. She believes that nothing is so good for her as diversion. I have always shrunk from being with her until now; but I have suddenly determined to join her."

"I am sure that the very best thing for you would be to have your mind so pleasantly employed that you had not time to think of your feelings," replied Kate. "You are better already, only for entertaining the thought. You seem like a different person."

"I feel like a different person," responded the other,

looking at her with strange scrutiny, "and I long to be gone," she added, suddenly, rising.

"Let me help you," said Kate, starting forward.

"Do not touch me." The command was so sharp that the girl stood back in surprise. Mrs. Exton smiled. "Let us see if I am a different person," she added, and then to Kate's amazement she walked into the house without support of any kind. In a moment the girl heard her calling Molly, in a voice full and penetrating.

CHAPTER XXIX.

"THEE LOVED I EVER."

THE following morning dawned fresh and bright. A little sunshine was for the first time admitted to Ray's room. Margery, pale, but with a gentle serenity in her blue eyes, sat beside his bed, waiting for him to take some notice of her. At last his heavy lids lifted.

"Where are we, Margery?" he asked. He had put the same question half a dozen times since yesterday morning.

"In the same place," she answered, smoothing his short dark hair. "It is very pleasant, isn't it, for us to have so much time together? It almost reconciles us to having you sick."

"Where is the doctor?"

"He is just outside. Shall I call him?"

"No, I don't want any one but you. What makes my head feel so strange."

"It was hurt. There is a little bruise up here on the side. Just think, it might have been on your forehead and spoiled it." Margery kissed it lightly.

"How good you are to stay with me. You will go with me to the concert, Margery? No matter what

Kate says. She ought to be married. It is too bad to think — what, what is it, Margery?"

"Yes, Ray, I am going everywhere with you. You like to have me with you all the time, don't you?"

"Yes, I want you, dear, I need you."

Margery trembled. She dreaded to say the wrong thing. There seemed such a thin dividing line between his sanity and delirium.

"When we are married I need never leave you," she murmured.

"No. We are going to be married," he said, smiling.

"When, Ray, how soon?"

"Very soon. It is all nonsense to wait, I say. I have money enough."

"Plenty, I am sure," said Margery, soothingly. "Why couldn't we be married now, Ray?"

"While I am sick?" he said, eagerly.

She laid her cool cheek gently against his. "Yes. Supposing we were married now, this morning, after you have slept a little while."

"Do you mean that, or is it one of the dreams?"

"You will not have any more unpleasant dreams, Ray. Go to sleep now, dear."

She rose and darkened the window, then returned to the bedside and sang a little lullaby.

After a while she ceased, supposing him to be asleep as he was very quiet. She rested her head against his pillow and closed her tired eyes.

"Margery!"

"What, Ray?"

"Did you say a while ago that we could be married to-day?"

"Yes, if you think it would not excite you too much."

"Put your cheek against mine, dear, and tell me the truth. Is it because I am going to die?"

"No, dear love. It is to make you get well the faster."

"You must be telling the truth."

"Could I speak to you at all, could I control my voice, if I thought you were going to leave me? You are very much better already, Ray." The inspiring strength of her soft voice and touch gave her patient a feeble thrill.

"Are you quite sure you cannot sleep? Shall I sing to you again."

"No, I do not want to sleep again until you are my wife, Margery."

She kissed him and went to the door. As soon as she opened it the doctor stepped into sight. "Mr. Wright may come now," she said, quietly. She went back to the window and re-admitted the golden shaft of sunlight, and then knelt down beside the bed. She took something from her pocket and put it into Ray's right hand. "That is my wedding ring," she said, softly. "Don't move, dear, you shall put it on my finger in a minute. Close your eyes. The minister is here and is going to read to us."

Mr. Wright had come in and was standing beside

her. The door was open, and the doctor, Mr. Exton, Kate, and Aunt Ann, stood just outside. She lifted Ray's hand and rested her cheek against it while the minister began quietly to read aloud. At the proper moment she slipped her finger through the ring. Ray lay pale and still, with his eyes obediently closed. His mind evidently did not wander, for his response was prompt and audible. There was a short prayer, then a slight rustle and the closing of a door, and the married pair were alone. The ceremony had been so brief and unexciting that Margery's last fear vanished.

"My darling husband, are you happy?" she said, gently.

The smile that stole over Ray's lips was radiant.

"'Thee loved I ever, I love but thee,'" he breathed, and paused.

Margery laid her soft hand against his cheek and kissed him.

"And thee will I love to eternity," she finished, solemnly.

Kate and Aunt Ann waited a long time in the parlor. Mr. Exton assured them that they should see Margery before they went. She had told him that she wanted to see them.

The three sat talking together in a very subdued mood when Dr. D—— came in, a smile on his usually non-committal face.

"Well, my friends," he said, "I feel pretty certain that I can take the evening train for Boston."

Exton nodded and smiled. "Then no harm has been done, you think."

"It looks as though certain good had been done. I am just from the patient and every symptom is favorable. I will have a talk with Dr. Oakley this afternoon, and then I think I may go. We doctors," turning to Kate, "wish there were more women like your sister."

"Are we going to see her?" asked Kate.

"Yes; she asked me to send you to her, Mr. Exton."

The latter rose promptly, and gave his hand to Kate. "I shall come up to the farm to-morrow," he said.

"We haven't told him a word about his ma," remarked Aunt Ann. "No," as he turned back anxiously, "she ain't sick; she's only, — well she's going away. You come and see her."

"I will," replied Exton, and left the room.

The doctor took his leave, and Aunt Ann and Kate were alone.

"Now, Kate," said the former, swallowing with evident difficulty, "we've cried enough. Do let's be cheerful, for Margery's sake."

She had hardly spoken the words when the girl came in. She wore a plain white dress, her sunny hair and blue eyes being the only color about her.

"Kate!"

"Margery!" and the two were locked in each other's arms. For all Aunt Ann's determination her tears flowed freely as she watched the meeting. The sisters looked into one another's faces fondly.

"Oh, how long it seems, Margery!"

"How good it is to see you again, Kate; why, you mustn't cry," continued Margery, turning to Aunt Ann, who embraced her, making broken apologies.

"Folks do cry at weddings, you know, Margery, and you and Ray are so dear," she said. "There, I've finished now, I'm sure, and I wish you a long life of happiness."

Margery smiled. Aunt Ann and Kate each had one of her hands.

"I am sure that there never was a happier bride," she returned. "Ray is decidedly better to-day, and Dr. D—— says everything is going on well."

"I am so glad for you, Margery," said Kate. "It is a great thing for you to be able to do so much for him right at the outset of your lives."

"And as soon as he's able to take a wedding trip to the farm you'll come up there," said Aunt Ann.

"That would be the very thing we should like best, but you have not room."

"Oh, but we shall have," returned the latter, eagerly. "Mrs. Exton is going away."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, she is, really. She's going to join her sister at some Springs somewhere in New York State. She may go any minute. Yes, I know it's queer; but she seems to be one of those kind of sick folks that's able to do whatever they want to."

"Is she angry with me?" asked Margery, quietly.

"I have thought that at a time when so much was at stake she would put aside her prejudices."

"Do not give the matter a second thought," said Kate, with her brilliant smile. "Your Uncle John has adopted your cause. You and Ray can be a second pair of babes in the woods, and he will look out for your needs."

"How I love that man!" said Margery, fervently. "Oh, Kate, I wish you knew him as I do. I was not worrying over finances when I spoke; for Mr. Exton told me yesterday that when Ray gets well he will take him into partnership."

There was a step in the hall as she spoke, and she had hardly finished when Mr. Exton came into the room.

"I am sorry to disturb you, Mrs. Ingalls," he said, brightly; "but your husband is asking for you."

She started, and bestowed hasty kisses on Kate and Aunt Ann. "Wait a few days," she said, "and then you can come to see me often. Good-bye, dear people."

Kate stood looking after her as she hurried from the room. Little Margery, married, hers no longer, absorbed, devoted to another. In that moment Kate felt one last pang of parting from the old life. Exton read her thoughts with love's intuition.

"Margery is wooed and married and all, and yet you find yourself free," he said, comfortingly.

"Yes," answered Kate. "It is a good thing to remind me of my blessings. I shall never forget how much I owe you, Mr. Exton. I did not feel grateful

at the time; but from this distance I do. Your mother —”

“Has she made you any apology, Miss Standish?”

“No; please do not urge it. She has taken a sudden determination to go away and join her sister at Richmond Springs. She seems much better, suddenly better.”

Exton raised his eyebrows and looked thoughtful. “I suppose I had better see her, then.”

“You can come up with us now if you want to,” said Aunt Ann. “I’ve got the double wagon.”

“Thank you; I will do so. I shall be back in time to see Dr. D——, and get his last directions.”

So Mr. Exton drove Dick, Aunt Ann’s strong, slow horse, homeward, with Aunt Ann and Kate on the back seat of the wagon. He found his mother superintending the packing of her trunk. She sent Molly out of the room as he entered it.

“You see I am going,” she said. “It would be an impossibility for me to remain here without angering you.”

John stood, leaning his elbow on the wooden mantel, with its wriggling, painted lines.

“Have you any objection to Miss Standish beyond the fact of her humble position and connections?” he asked, quietly.

Mrs. Exton made an impatient gesture. “None other is needed. I wanted her for a companion. That is her proper niche.”

“I want her for my companion. I hope she will see that to be her proper niche.”

"I will never remain where I shall have to answer people's questions about her; where I shall be obliged to betray the bitter disappointment you have caused me."

"I refuse to quarrel with you, mother. This is all very premature. I told you my hopes for Miss Standish's sake, because I thought I might influence you to see with my eyes. I prophesy that if she consents to be my wife, she will become a power in society, by right of her own force and magnetism, aside from any position I can give her. You are a prudent, shrewd woman. Surely you realize that any open break now may result in awkwardness for the future."

"I do not feel the need of your advice, John. Remember that my heart is open to you whenever you want my affection. I take the train at seven o'clock. I shall stop in and see Ray on my way to the depot."

"I hardly think Margery will let you see him. We all defer to her judgment. Intuition seems to serve her in that sick-room in place of experience. We have been sorry every time we have deviated from her suggestions."

Mrs. Exton bit her lip. "His own grandmother!" she exclaimed. "The idea that I should have to ask permission of that child —"

"That child is Ray's wife."

"What!"

"They were married this morning."

Mrs. Exton gave him one look of angry reproach.

"That is another case, mother, where, if you will

take my advice, you will leave a pleasant message behind you. Consider the future. I am going to take Ray into partnership."

The old lady rose and crossed the room with a firm tread, threw the door open and called her maid.

"Go on with the packing," she ordered.

"I will not interrupt you any longer," said Exton, and withdrew. He did not see his mother again until he went to the train to bid her good-bye. Sore as his heart was over her obstinacy and bitterness, he could not help smiling as he introduced Dr. D—— to her. The doctor was leaving by the same train, and Exton foresaw the helpless fashion in which she would be obliged to listen all the evening to his enthusiastic praises of Margery. Of course the doctor would suppose that he could find no more welcome theme for conversation than her new granddaughter.

There was a blessed atmosphere of peace at the farm that night. Aunt Ann and Kate could hardly make up their minds to go to bed, for enjoyment of it. There was a placidity in Kits' smile, as he lay beside them with his eyes closed, that did not escape his mistress' observation.

"I'm sure if ever a cat enjoyed a good conscience you do, Kits. You've remembered to speak pleasant right straight along. He was a good, patient old fellow, so he was," and Aunt Ann stooped over to smooth the cat's back.

Kate laughed. "I think you couldn't have been on the piazza a few minutes before they started, when

poor Dandy was making his adieux. Kits came around the corner suddenly, and flew at him with a speech that was anything but pleasant."

"That was because he was taken by surprise, Kate. Kits is very impulsive; that's his way."

"Well, I imagine Dandy will spend his night in hoping that there will not be any impulsive cats at Richmond Springs. How different the house feels, Aunt Ann."

"As different as daylight and dark. I've got all the windows open in her room, and there's a draught right through, so's to blow out any stray scraps she may have left behind her of selfishness, exactingness, complaining, jealousy, and pride."

"No wonder we are happy to-night," rejoined the girl, dreamily, smoothing Kits' head. The evening was cool, and she wore a cashmere dress, while Aunt Ann's was calico; so it was into the woollen lap that Kits had suddenly leaped with a lofty certainty of welcome. "We have the house to ourselves; we are looking forward to a long visit from Margery and Ray; what more could we ask for?"

The speaker was quite unconscious that these blessings, with all their accompanying freedom and pleasure, would count for naught should she suddenly hear that a certain tall, serious man, who was sharing Margery's watch to-night in the village, had betaken himself to parts unknown. She was as yet ignorant of the fact that her surroundings took their coloring, chameleon-like, from John Exton's presence.

CHAPTER XXX.

WOOD VIOLETS.

L O O I Y S

RAY and Margery had been at the farm a week, and Ray was beginning to walk about out of doors. A whole chapter might be given to describing the devotion of his young wife; but the imagination can depict the innumerable attentions that Margery found loving reason to pay him in the course of a day.

Aunt Ann never tired of watching them together.

"She isn't beginning right with me," said Ray, shaking his head gravely. "This is the sort of treatment that develops a husband into a tyrant; isn't it, Aunt Ann?"

"Just wait until you can go alone, young man, and see how suddenly you will have to turn around and wait on me," remarked Margery, gayly. Ray still carried his arm in a sling, and looked pale and interesting; but he was well enough to enjoy life at the farm thoroughly. Aunt Ann had been easily persuaded to take Mr. Exton into her family; and time could not be said to hang heavily on the hands of any one of the quintette.

Ray enjoyed lying in a hammock, with Margery sitting beside him going on with her sewing from the point where she had been obliged so suddenly to abandon it. They could watch Exton and Kate playing tennis close by. The latter was being taught the game; and her efforts, failures, and successes provided plenty of amusement for the audience. Kate came up one afternoon, flushed and tired with her exertions, and threw herself down on the grass beside the hammock.

"I think you have laughed at me enough for one day, my dear brother," she said, panting.

"No, indeed; laugh and grow fat," returned Ray. "You are better than a tonic. I suspect by the time I am able to play you will beat me all to pieces."

"You must not get too heated, Kate," observed Margery, threading her needle. She had taken to making wise suggestions to her sister, of late, with a little matronly manner which amused the latter immensely.

"I cannot let you off yet, Miss Kate," said Exton, coming up at this juncture. "We have an hour yet before it is time to go for the mail." By which remark it will be seen that for these two to perform the onerous duty of bringing the family's mail had become a daily affair.

"Well, good-bye, then," said Kate, accepting his hand in rising from the grass. "I will add a little more to Ray's weight. You ought to be making me help you sew instead, Margery."

"Never mind," said the latter, with a contented smile. "I have all my life now in which to prepare my *trousseau*."

Ray took advantage of the fact that the tennis players had turned their backs to seize Margery's hand and carry it to his lips. They were an uncommonly considerate young couple. They usually did wait for people's backs to be turned for the commission of such petty larcenies.

"'Love all,' " repeated Ray, after a minute, echoing Exton's call. "A very good suggestion. Have you ever thought of it, Margery?"

"Of what?"

"That those two would make a good match."

Of course, Margery had thought of it twenty times a day in the last week. What young wife is not a matchmaker? But enough of bygone teaching remained with her to render her cautious, even in speaking to Ray. Uncle John's importance still remained an imposing fetish, even though she had come to be so deeply attached to him, and to know the honest straightforwardness of his nature.

"You needn't be in such a hurry to get Kate married now," she said, evasively.

"No," returned Ray, lazily, "that is true; but I wonder who it is that Uncle John says is so in love with her, some friend of his."

"Indeed!" said Margery, with interest. "I wonder if it could possibly be the man who pays her extra salary at church. Wouldn't that be romantic?"

"Would it? You are authority."

"Well, he cannot have her, Ray. She is going to live with us, isn't she, and have the prettiest room in the house?"

"Every room, if she wants it; but it is a wonder Uncle John doesn't see what a fine girl she is. I suppose he's like one of these big trout who has been angled for so much that he can't be induced to touch any fly, no matter how bright its wings are. Why, Kate is almost as good-looking as you are."

"Ray Ingalls, are you blind? As good-looking as I am! I am *nothing* beside Kate! Well, yes, dear; of course, I am to you; but to an impartial observer — why, you don't *appreciate* Kate!"

"That is just the way he went on that night we were talking about you both, telling how this man, whoever he is, raved over her, and praising her up beyond you. It made me tired."

"He wouldn't tell who the man was?" Margery looked around at him sharply.

"No; just walked up and down the floor and ranted."

"Why, Ray Ingalls!" Margery turned and looked long and thoughtfully at the tennis players, then back at her husband. "You dear old stupid," she said, smiling; and her cheeks reddened. Then she picked up her work, still smiling, and went on sewing and humming a little song. Ray was too languidly, lazily happy to inquire into her epithet. A successful hit of Kate's challenged his attention. "Hurrah," he cried, "that was a good one, Margery."

"The violets!" exclaimed the latter, suddenly, looking off into space.

"What violets?"

"Oh — a — nothing." And she went on sewing, fast and furiously. The players finally ceased, and came slowly toward them, talking and laughing.

"I do not believe I have breath enough left to walk down to the post-office," announced Kate.

"Oh, you can take it slowly," replied Margery. "It is too bad to make Uncle John go alone."

"Cruelty, pure and simple," said Exton.

"Then you should not have made me play so long," returned Kate.

"You must change your dress, dear," said Margery. "Go right in and do it, and put on that lavender and white muslin."

Kate laughed. She thought her sister was becoming unnecessarily explicit.

"You are getting extravagant, my dear. I do not care to drag my best dress through the woods."

"Oh, pshaw, the season is almost over," said Margery; "put it on to please me."

The season is almost over! The words startled Kate. Almost September. Almost time for routine work to commence. Of course, she would walk through the woods to the post-office. Of course, she would accept every pleasure of the pleasant time with a grateful heart.

She went into the house. She committed the extravagance of putting on the fresh, dainty muslin, in

which she knew she looked her best; but she did not know how lovely her best was. She was too accustomed to the sight of her own attractions in the glass; and she had never had occasion to set any value upon her looks.

She came across the grass to the group by the hammock; and even Ray had admiring eyes for her.

"Couldn't you wear that all the time, Kate," he asked.

"Will you give me another when it is gone?" she retorted, laughingly.

"Indeed, I will, and call it a cheap bargain. I always did wish I had a pretty sister. I think I've killed two birds with one stone, don't you, Uncle John?"

Exton was looking at Kate with such open admiration that Margery found it necessary to conceal her agitation by using her dressmaker's privilege to give her sister's drapery an unnecessary arranging.

"Do go along," she said. "I fully expect a letter to-night."

She stood watching Kate and Exton pass down the slope, and cross the brook on a plank, whose breadth gave the latter no excuse for the manner in which he turned to help Kate across. They disappeared among the trees. Margery returned to Ray's side. She took his hand, and pressed it against her heart. "Feel how it beats," she said, looking excitedly down at him.

Ray smiled. "I should be very sorry if it didn't," he replied.

She sighed. "Once in a very, *very* long while I wish you were a girl, Ray," she remarked.

Exton and Kate found only the former's business mail in the office, together with a telegram, for that was the deliberate manner of conveying telegrams in Cedarville. He tore it open and gave an impatient exclamation. "I must go back to town to-morrow," he said, in an annoyed tone.

Kate did not know whether the annoyance proceeded from some bad news, or from the fact of being obliged to leave Cedarville.

"Perhaps you think it is kind to leave me to take this long walk alone every day," she returned, lightly. She passed ahead of him through a gap in a stone wall, and they crossed a sunny strip of pasture land before entering the woods.

"It will not be for many days," he replied, eagerly.

"Oh, you are coming back again?"

They had passed into the woods now, and were walking side by side in the narrow path. His face fell at the indifference of her tone. "I did expect to," he returned, "if you think it would be agreeable."

Kate found no words readily to reply to this, so she said nothing.

"Perhaps," he hesitated, "I have been inconsiderate. I have not thought until now that perhaps I am imposing upon Miss Eaton. She is so hospitable she would never allow me to see it."

"Oh," said Kate, nervously, "I don't think so. We

— we like to have you here. I should be sure to know it if you were at all unwelcome.”

“Then do you think I had better come back?”

“I do not know, of course, whether it is better for you.”

“Neither do I,” said Exton, with a long breath. He was far from being an assured lover. He had never felt so timid in his life as at this instant. “I think you had better decide for me, Miss Kate.”

“There, I have torn my dress!” she exclaimed, as the flimsy muslin caught on a log.

Her companion stooped and disengaged it. “It is not badly torn,” he said, earnestly, going down on one knee in the leafy path and holding the flounce in both hands as he examined the little rent. “Is it very important?”

Kate sighed. “It is my best dress. It was foolish in me to wear it.”

“It is too bad,” said the other, sympathetically. He could not know that the organdie had not cost five dollars a yard.

“But I can easily mend it,” she added, more cheerfully.

“Could you not pin it up so it will not tear any further?”

“Yes, if I had a pin.”

“Well, I have one; here it is.”

Kate thanked him and sat down on the log. Exton seated himself beside her, and watched her hands as

she wove in the couple of pins he gave her. When it was done she started to rise.

"Let us wait a little," he suggested. "This is a pleasant half-way house. What were we talking about? Oh, yes; I had just left it to you to say whether I should come back again. This is a lonely walk for one. Do you not think I had better?"

Kate turned away and dug the point of her parasol into the damp moss that lay near the log, where the ground declined to the edge of a little stream. The trees rustled above their heads, and the late afternoon sunlight slanted through their branches. There was that rare inflection in his voice that made her heart beat painfully, and she had to recall desperately every sensible theory concerning the humane confirmed bachelor.

"I cannot judge you by myself, Mr. Exton," she replied. "I am eager for as long a vacation as I can get. You see it is a desperate case with me," she added, laughing naturally. "I have a long working day ahead. If I anticipated being able to run away South, for instance, in the middle of winter, it would be different; as it is, I want every day here in the country that I can get."

"Should you like to go South?"

"Indeed, I should. Ray and Margery were talking about it the other day. I foresee considerable trouble between that young couple and myself. Margery is going to be so determined that I shall have every pleasure she does, that I do not know how it will work

for me to live with them. Dear child, how she will enjoy social gayety! But I shall hold the threat over her that unless she will let me live my life quite separate from hers I shall have to go elsewhere."

"You mean to be as rigid as ever in your rules about mixing work and play?" Exton asked the question dispiritedly. Her manner discouraged him.

"I am going to try."

"Well, shall we go on?" he said, after a pause.

She rose with a sudden sinking of the heart. Why should she experience such a sensation of disappointment? She had expected nothing. They moved along again side by side.

"Here we are at the slough of despond," he remarked as the ground descended and grew damp. He stooped, and, rising, placed three violets in her hand. "This path grows more uncertain every day. There!" as she made a misstep, "that is the second time you have slipped. You might turn your ankle in this rough place. Won't you take my arm?"

"Thank you; I do not need it."

"Yes; you had better let me help you." He drew her hand through his arm. "I believe you do not like to lean on any one."

She did like to lean on him. Had he suspected how well, this scene would not have been prolonged.

She drew the stems of the violets through a button-hole of her dress. Her head was close to him as she did so, and he looked longingly at every lovely feature which lingered so tenderly in his memory when she

was not by. Did woman ever have so fine a skin, such soft and pretty hair?

"I think I had better not come back," he said, abruptly.

"Oh, have you decided it? I am so sorry!"

"Are you sorry?"

"Of course I am. Why, I haven't learned tennis yet."

Exton looked gloomily at the ground. "Ray can finish your education."

Kate sighed lightly. "We shall all miss you very much. How quickly pleasant experiences pass."

"Will life be any less pleasant to you when I am gone?" he asked, suddenly, but very gravely.

"What an odd question!" returned Kate, in a flutter of discomfort, with her hand pinioned so close within his arm.

"But it wants an answer." The courage of despair had overtaken the speaker.

"I did not suspect you of vanity."

"And you do not now. I want you to extinguish every spark of hope in me so thoroughly that it can find no reason, however absurd, to become fanned into life again."

Kate leaned heavily on his arm.

"Answer me."

"I cannot speak," she breathed. "Wait."

"Ah! You did turn your ankle!" exclaimed Exton, penitently, observing her pallor. "You have been too brave."

He feared she was going to faint, for her head drooped. He took her hand and supported her with his arm, holding her so that her head leaned against his shoulder.

"I shall be myself in a minute," she said, faintly. "Tell me again what you said."

"It is absurd for me to force my troubles upon you when you are in pain. Let me help you to that rock over there."

"No," said Kate, softly; "I am not suffering. Tell me, please."

He could not understand her passivity. He looked down at her straight, white parting. He had always felt a fastidious pleasure in the smooth fashion in which her hair waved away from it, in contrast to the bangs and frizzes he saw on other women.

He pressed her to him unconsciously as he spoke. "I want you to say in so many words, 'I do not love you. I never can love you. This is final.' For I need heroic treatment. Nothing less can cure me."

Kate was still, only it seemed to her that the glad, strong music of her heart-beats must fill the wood. Then she slowly drew away from him and stood there with her eyes cast down but her lips parted in a radiant and tender smile.

"I cannot say it," she said. Then she held out both her hands to him.

Ray was in the hammock again when they returned. Margery had dropped her sewing and sat watching the

glorious western sky. Aunt Ann was near by, and Kits, with his head on one side and his eyes half closed, was sitting on his haunches, waving his tail gently to and fro and watching a young and inexperienced sparrow, who was trying his powers in the tree above them. Kits thought there was a reasonable probability of the bird's miscalculating the distance from one branch to another. If it should prove so — well, Kits was fond of sparrow *au naturel*.

"There come the postmen," said Aunt Ann, as Kate and Exton crossed the brook. They came very slowly up the lawn, talking earnestly, as though minutes were precious.

It naturally took some time to do justice to her delight in discovering the donor of the violets, to explain that there had never been a moment when he had not preferred her voice over that of any other living vocalist, to discuss every event of their acquaintance with its joys and disappointments.

Margery watched them eagerly, Ray lazily, Aunt Ann complacently. Kits watched the sparrow.

"Where is my letter?" called Margery, absolutely unable to keep silence as they approached. They looked so aggravatingly well together. If nothing had happened she should be out of patience.

"I forget," replied Kate, confusedly. Then, turning to John, "Was there a letter for her?"

He took the bunch from his pocket and ran them over. "No," he answered.

"You must have taken a great deal of interest in your errand," observed Ray, laughing.

Kate turned away as if to go toward the house. Exton seized her hand and drew her back.

"Do not go, Kate. They are all friends here," he said, with a slight smile.

Margery looked keenly into her sister's rosy face. "Oh!" she exclaimed, involuntarily.

"What is it, Margery?" asked Exton.

"Oh, — nothing. That western sky is so lovely."

"I don't believe a word of it," said the other. "I think you suspect your sister."

"What of?" asked Margery, with wide-eyed innocence. Kate, making a virtue of necessity, had put her hand through Aunt Ann's arm.

"She is afraid that now you are married she cannot have sufficient control over you merely as your sister. She thinks of becoming your aunt."

Margery caught her breath, flung her arms about Kate's neck and kissed her, Ray meanwhile looking on with a slow comprehension; Aunt Ann put on her spectacles. "What's the matter?" she asked, mildly.

"Why, Kate and Uncle John," explained Margery, incoherently. "Just the loveliest thing in the world."

"There goes my pretty sister, the minute I've secured her," grumbled Ray, with the broadest of smiles. "You were the man all the time, Uncle John. Confound my stupidity."

Aunt Ann beamed first upon one and then upon the

other with surprise and delight. But a gratified sense of her own perspicacity suddenly possessed her.

"Kate, you know I always *said*—" she began.

Kate put a hand over her mouth. "Never mind what you always said, Aunt Ann."

Margery danced over to where Kits was sitting, and caught him up.

"Wish her joy, Kits," she said, forcing his paw into Kate's hand. "You shall have a new blue satin ribbon, and dance at the wedding."

Kits gave a loud meow of disgust as he leaped down. He had lost his chance with the sparrow.

But Aunt Ann had to go in to see about supper, and Margery had to walk up to the house with Ray, and Kate and John were left alone under the great elm tree.

The latter stood looking down at Kate's averted face with a great content in his eyes.

She lifted hers to meet them.

"Your mother," she said, softly and regretfully. "This is why she went away."

Exton smiled re-assuringly. "Shall I tell you what my mother will do in the future?" he asked.

"I am not sure that I wish to hear."

"Yes, you do. When you have won the hearts of her dear five hundred, and she hears your praises, she will return and take all the credit of having discovered you. You may have to endure a little patronage from her, but it will be affectionate."

"I am afraid you are like the majority of fortune-tellers, and tell only what I wish to hear," responded the girl, nevertheless comforted. They exchanged a look in which Mrs. Exton was entirely forgotten.

"When shall we go South, Kate?"

"I do not care so much as I did about climates."

"Let it be at the new year. Will you, dear? Let the new year and the new life begin together, and it should be among the flowers."

"Yes, there should be plenty of flowers," answered Kate.

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